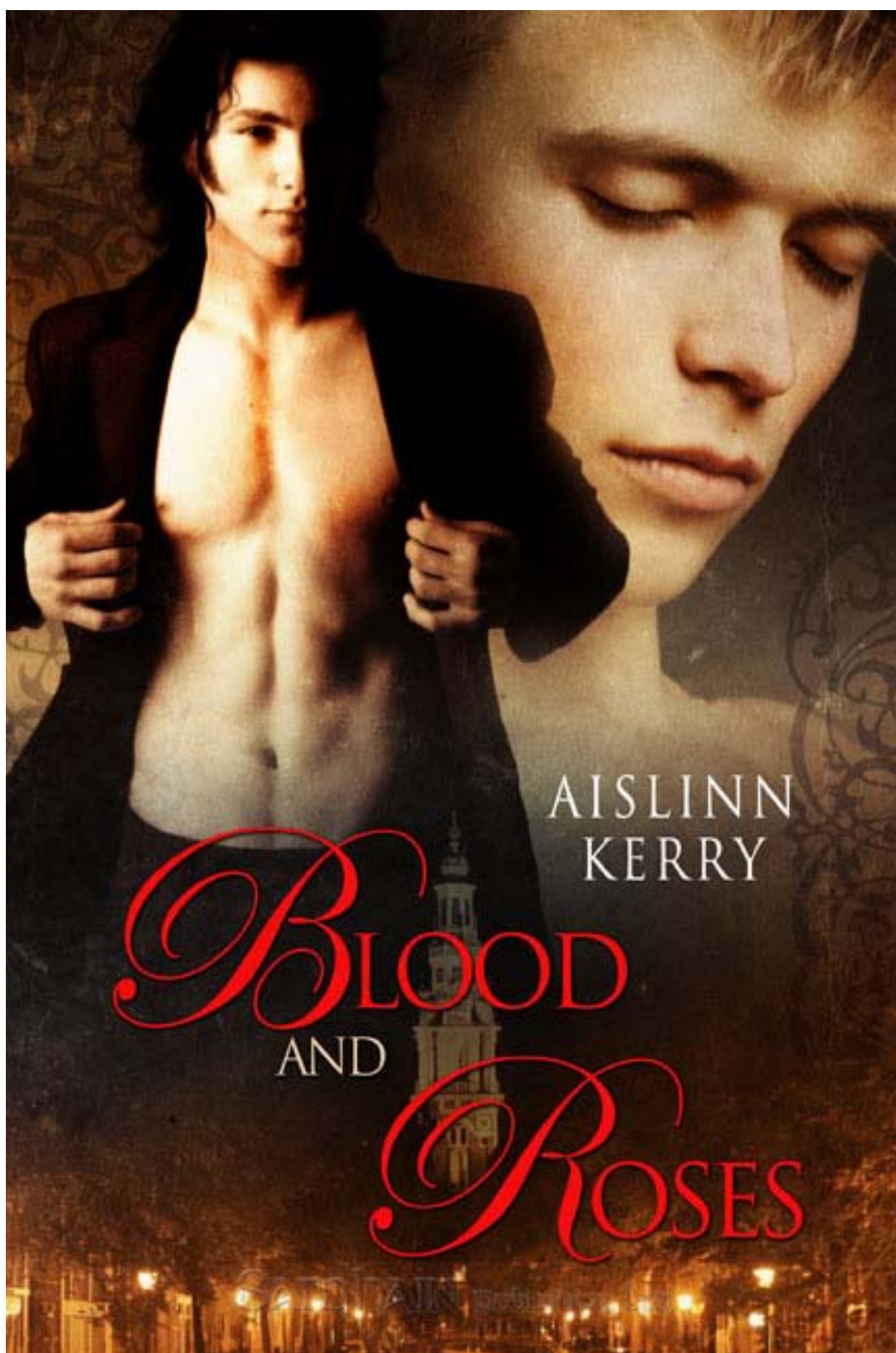




In this world, love can put you on the wrong end of a stake...

The last thing Arjen wants is a vampire in his bed. The rest of the world may be enamored of the creatures, but he doesn't share the obsession. When local vampire Maikel van Triet pays a visit to the brothel, Arjen tries to slip away—drawing the one thing he doesn't want: Maikel's attention. Arjen's too pragmatic to refuse a paying customer, but Maikel doesn't want his services. All he asks for is a bed, shelter, and a meal before bedtime.

Arjen's reticence and open dislike intrigue Maikel, who's delighted by the jaded young prostitute's attitude, so different from the adoration he's accustomed to. He's never been a regular patron at any brothel, but now he can't keep himself away. He still refuses Arjen's services though, instead demanding Arjen tuck him in with tales of the daytime Amsterdam he hasn't known for nearly two centuries. But when Arjen tries to seduce him into leaving, he realizes they're forging something completely unfamiliar to him: emotional bonds.

It's equally obvious to Arjen that their arrangement is becoming more than either of them expected, and the thought terrifies him. Vampires are shallow, fickle creatures, and Maikel could never truly love another—could he?

Warning: Contains blood, vampire bites, unapologetic prostitution, and lots of gay vampire lovin'.

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Blood and Roses

Aislinn Kerry

Dedication

For Terra

The bestest fangirl EVAH, and the best kind of bossy

Chapter One

I was not the only man in the parlor that night, but I was one of the few not looking for a whore.

The girls sat about, mostly, combing their hair or bent in gossip with one another. There was little else to do; it had been a slow night, and patrons came in a discouraging trickle. Occasionally a girl would spy someone she fancied, rise, stretch, and amble over so as not to betray her interest too readily. I sat by a window where the breeze might reach me and played draughts with Elise. There were too many of us in the parlor, crowded and overheated, not enough patrons culling our ranks to keep the numbers at a reasonable level. The chair put my back to the door, and Elise was to spy over my shoulder and give a signal if any patrons seemed to be the sort who might find me a more suitable companion than one of the girls.

I was bent over the board studying my next move when a collective shiver seemed to overtake us all as one. I straightened and saw Elise staring over my shoulder, leaning to get a better view. The other girls, those who I could see, were already scrambling to their feet, idle pursuits cast aside, tripping over their skirts as they rushed to greet this newcomer.

I rose from our table, one of only a handful not already flinging myself at this newest patron, and cast a brief glance behind me, wondering who it was this time the women were making fools of themselves over.

I did not have to wonder *what* it was. Only one thing turned these working women to sycophants at a mere glance.

Vampire. The king himself might have walked through our doors and not received such a welcome.

I saw a shock of hair as dark as sin in that brief glance, and a flashing glimpse of narrowed eyes, just as black. But mostly what I saw were the women, thronged about him, simpering and sighing and tugging their bodices down in the futile hope that a flash of breast might set them above the others and earn them his company in their bed. Already his name was being whispered in hushed tones better reserved for gods or saints.

“Maikel van Triet,” they murmured, reaching, as though his very name might summon him to them.

I swept the pieces from the board in disgust and slipped about the edges of the parlor to the stairs. The night was a loss already, and dawn near enough that I had little hope of salvaging it. There was no reason to stay and watch these women I worked with and mostly liked turn to mindless fools.

Behind me, he began to speak, and though I could not make out the words, I could feel the way they fell upon the crowd like stones dropped into a puddle, reaction rippling out in waves.

I had one foot on the stairs and thought I might have managed a clean escape when he spoke again, and this time I did hear it: “Wait,” he said.

He might have been talking to anyone, any one of the women pressed in close about him. Surely he hadn’t noticed me, with so many others vying for his attention. And yet, I could not help it. I stopped and turned back, hoping I would see him addressing another.

He was looking straight at me, over the heads of the women as though they did not exist, or as though he was so accustomed to such displays that they didn’t even merit attention. His eyes were not narrowed now, but open and dark, watching me with puzzlement.

“Come back,” he told me. “Come here.”

“Will you buy a place in my bed, sir?” I asked him, unmoving. I would not return for less. I was not even sure I would do it for that.

“Will you have me?” he countered, and gave a grin that made the women sigh like besotted girls.

I crossed my arms and regarded him across the distance. He was pleasant enough to look on, a contrast of dark hair, dark eyes and pale, ivory skin. He dressed to emphasize the drama of it. Were he any other patron, I would lead him to my bed and consider myself lucky to have anyone there at all.

But he was vampire, and his kind never failed to turn the very sensible members of my acquaintance into the greatest of idiots, all slaving to get close and earn a taste of eternity. Who could resist such a temptation?

Not even I, though it was not the lure of his immortality that decided me. It had been a slow night, and business had been poor all week. I was not so well-off that I could afford to turn away a paying customer.

I jerked my head at the stairs. His grin spread, and he wended his way through the crowd to my side. He reached for me, took my hand before I realized what he was about and could snatch it back.

The women gossiped about their patrons, of course, and the lucky few who had taken vampires to their beds gossiped about that most of all. Perhaps they spoke of what a vampire’s touch was like. I did not know, for I had not cared to listen. If I had taken the effort to wonder, I would have supposed that, without the fire of life burning within them, their touch would have been cold as ice and chilled to the bone.

Maikel’s palm burned against mine like an ember. His fingers wrapped about my hand and scorched like tongues of flame.

I jerked from his grasp, turning up the stairs. He followed. Neither of us spoke, but the whispers of the others carried after us. If he heard, he gave them no mind. I supposed he was probably used to it.

I stopped before my door, fingertips resting on the handle, and turned back to him. I held my other hand out, open, palm up. “Is it a tryst you want? Or to stay the night?” We both of us ignored the fact that it was nearly dawn, and night to him meant the full bright of day.

He laughed a little. “A tryst, no. That’s not what I came for.” He counted guilders into my palm, more than I normally charged for a full night, more even than I’d have asked of him, so many that it was all I

could do not to gape in astonishment. When he had finished, he curled my fingers around the coins and held my hand in his, giving me a crooked smile. "I'm Maikel," he said quietly.

I looked down at the silver glinting between my fingers, enough to turn this whole miserable night into a remarkably profitable one. "I know who you are." I pushed my door open and led him inside.

"Do you, then?" That odd, bemused half-smile still hovered about his face. He lingered in my doorway, watching as I crossed to my bureau and put his fee in my coffer. "I had wondered."

"You are Maikel van Triet, and a vampire, and your reputation precedes you." He knew it, of course. It was not only the brothel whores who fawned over his kind. Some days, it seemed all anybody in Amsterdam cared to talk about.

He closed my door with a muted click of the latch and crossed to the window as I tucked my coffer into the back of a drawer. My view looked out over the canal, and the sounds of conversation and gurgling water drifted up to us on the night's breeze.

"What will you?" I asked when it seemed he might stand there looking out until the sun rose. "Your reputation has preceded you, but not so much that I know your desires."

He did not answer me at first, but closed and latched my shutters with deliberate care. When they were shut fast against the approaching dawn, he turned to face me, hands braced behind him on the sill. "I desire a bed until dark," he said. "And surety that the shutters will remain closed until then."

My brows climbed my forehead. I stared at him, nonplussed. "That's all?"

His head fell forward, sending a lock of dark hair curling against his cheek. It didn't quite hide the slight smile that curved his lips. "And the decency not to send me to bed hungry."

I had expected he might request something of the sort. Still, I turned aside, crouching to tug at a boot as pretense, for fear my expression might betray me. I was not like the others, who took vampires to bed and proudly displayed their bites the next morning, whispering in rapturous tones of an experience so transcendental it brought them closer to God, or who hoped silently that a patron might one night take too much and make her one of his own. I did not care to be bitten. But he was a patron, and I had taken his coin.

Barefoot, I straightened and rolled up my cuff to uncover my left arm, the arteries of which were said to carry the sweetest, purest blood, pumped direct from the heart. I crossed to the bed and sat on it, stretched my arm out toward him, wrist turned up.

He sat facing me and took my hand in both of his. His thumbs brushed across my wrist and lingered over my pulse. "You don't like me, do you?" he asked without a bit of resentment.

He didn't look away from me and there was no challenge in his gaze, nothing in it daring me to confess. It was simple and direct, an honest request for nothing more or less than the truth.

I shrugged and broke my gaze away. "Not very much, no."

I had to look back when he laughed, soft and amused. "And yet you would offer me this?"

“You paid for it.”

He kept my hand cradled in both of his, holding it in his lap like something cherished, fingers stroking tenderly. “I believe I am at a disadvantage. You seem to know a great deal about me, but I do not even know your name.” He didn’t look away from my wrist, where fine blue veins drew wandering tracks beneath the skin.

“It’s Arjen,” I said in a voice gone rough and dry.

“Arjen,” he echoed and bent over my wrist.

His hair fell about his face, so I could not see. His lips were warm on my skin, his kiss as sweet as a lover’s. My hand curled into a fist, then spasmed when his thumb dug into the flesh, finding a vein and pinning it in place. I braced my other hand behind me, clenched on the blankets.

His lips parted, breath gusting across my skin like a summer breeze off the water, hot and damp. His mouth formed a seal on my skin, sucking hard enough that I gasped and had to wrestle down the urge to jerk back. His fingers, gentle before, now held my hand with an iron grip. I could try to pull away, but I doubted he’d let me. Fangs pricked my skin like needles, probing. And without warning he bit deep, sinking into me.

I thrashed, unthinking, as agony coursed through me, and realized it hadn’t been greed that made him hold me so tight. I’d have torn my wrist open on his teeth if he’d let me.

He drank, sucking hard at the wound with a rhythm that echoed the thundering beat of my heart. I twisted and tore at the blankets, struggling against the overwhelming instinct to fight.

He bore me down onto my back, his body stretched along mine, and pinned me in place with a surprising strength for someone as lean as he was, so that I could not fight even if I tried. For my benefit, I wondered, or for his? His fangs never withdrew, and his throat never ceased its steady, rhythmic sucking.

I had suffered any number of indignities at the hands of my patrons, and most of them I had done in willing trade for the coin they put in my coffer. But I had never felt as completely helpless as I did then, fully clothed beneath Maikel’s slight weight with his fangs buried in my wrist.

Mentally, I cursed the gossips a hundred different ways. There was no rapture in this, no transcendence, only the throb of the wound and the heat of Maikel’s mouth as he drank my blood from me.

Somehow, my hand had found its way into his hair, fingers twisting knots into the strands, though I did not remember putting it there. I didn’t think I meant to do something so foolish and useless as try to push him back, but my fingers needed something to cling to, something to grip, and it seemed as likely a place as any to bury them.

When at last he released his grip on my arm and let his fangs slip free, I felt as exhausted as if I’d wrestled a badger. I slumped back into the mattress, and Maikel leaned his brow against my shoulder. His back rose and fell like he’d exerted himself just as hard. After a moment, he rolled off me. I pushed myself up on my uninjured arm and looked down at him. “That is truly all you want of me?”

He nodded slowly, keeping his eyes closed. “Let me sleep in peace and I’ll count myself quite satisfied.”

“As you like,” I muttered and crossed the room to my bureau. We all kept bandages tucked away in our rooms in case of something like this, though in truth, when I’d shoved mine into the back of a drawer I had not expected to ever have the need to dig it out again. Still, I was glad now to have it, and I sat gingerly at the end of the bed to dress my wound. By the time I’d finished, Maikel was fast asleep, sprawled quite comfortably upon my blankets. I crept out and ventured downstairs in search of breakfast.

Elise agreed to let me sleep in her bed, then kept me up all morning with endless, breathless questions about Maikel. She sighed like a romantic when I told her he’d refused my services after they’d been rightfully purchased, and shivered as though party to a lascivious secret when I showed her my bandaged wound. She asked me to describe it over and over again, until I realized that what she really wanted was for me to tell her a story like all the others she’d heard, of sweeping romance and unimaginable pleasure and enough cloying sentiment to make a person sick. I shooed her off, pleading exhaustion, and managed a few hours of sleep before the afternoon sun slanting through her window woke me.

I could have risen and closed her shutters and had a few more hours sleep. Instead I lay there for a few moments, my arm shading my eyes, thinking of my own shuttered room and the man in my bed.

My wrist throbbed with a dull ache. I stretched my arm out to inspect the bandage and sighed to see that blood was showing through in places. It’d dry and stick to the wound if I let it. I rose and poured water from Elise’s ewer into a basin. I soaked my forearm in it as I began to carefully unwrap the bandage.

I went slowly, giving the water time to work its way in and soften it. Even so, when the last strip came off, the wound had cracked open and a few drops of blood seeped out. I rinsed them away and returned to my room to rebandage it.

Wary of Maikel’s admonishment that he wished for undisturbed sleep, I pushed the door open gently so the hinges would not squeak. Even so, I had not taken two steps into the room when he stirred and pushed himself up onto an elbow.

I hesitated. “I did not think you’d be up so soon.”

He shoved his hair out of his face. His gaze sought out my wrist. “I smelled blood.”

I grimaced and showed him my newly opened wound as explanation. “Sorry.”

He shook his head and waved as though to dismiss my concern. Instead of lying down again, he propped his back against my headboard and watched me as I went about dressing my wound again.

I turned my back to him, scowling at the weight of his gaze upon me, and the sensation of crawling insects that it sent prickling across my skin.

“You really *don’t* like me, do you?” he asked unexpectedly. He sounded surprised and—surprisingly—somewhat pleased.

“Not very much, no,” I told him again. I did not turn to look at him.

The bed creaked, and I could imagine him leaning back in it, contemplating me with that strange half-smile. “You could have said no.”

I did turn, then, my brows drawn together with irritation. “And you could have slept in any bed in Amsterdam, fed from anyone you cared to have, for free. If you’re not interested in our trade, why come here for a bed and pay such an exorbitant fee?”

He looked up at my ceiling and lazily brushed away a strand of hair that had caught on his lips. “Those others, the ones who throw themselves at me. They’re all the same. They don’t really care about me, and they don’t care that I don’t care about them.”

“But you care that *I* don’t?” I shook my head and tied the bandage off with a knot.

“Well, it’s a change,” he said, and the smile was back, lurking at the edges of his expression as though too shy to venture out in the open.

I scooped my boots from where I’d left them. “There’s a few hours left to dusk. You should make use of what you’ve paid for. Soon as night falls, I’ll need my bed again.”

He nodded amiably enough, but made no move to lie back down.

I strode out with an impatient gesture. If he expected me to stay and press the matter with him, he was wrong. He had bought my bed from dawn to dusk, and it was his to do with as he pleased, even if that meant refusing my services and casting me out and sitting awake, imprisoned by the sun and all alone in my drab little room with nothing better to do than study the grain of the wood in the planks that formed my walls.

Downstairs, most of the girls were awake and beginning to prepare for the evening to come, dressing their hair and debating perfume. A few wielded needles, repairing garments that had been rent by overzealous patrons. A whore’s pride was in her appearance, her baubles and scents, in the lengthy measures it took to stand out from the dozens of others in the crowded brothel, and in the whole of De Wallen itself. And every one of them ceased their ministrations when I came down the stairs, crowded around me as though I were a vampire myself, and demanded I spare no detail.

I sat on the second-lowest step, unable to progress farther into the parlor without pushing people out of the way, and wondered if Maikel van Triet might not have been the better choice in company.

Chapter Two

I did not expect to see the vampire again. I chalked his visit up as an unexpected windfall and an easy night's work, kept the extra coin tucked safely away in my coffer, and continued about my business. A week to the day later, and in the grip of another interminably slow night, I came down to the parlor and froze at the sight of Maikel in the foyer, his hat in his hand, scanning the crowd of whores with eyes that seemed blind until they lit on me. He grinned—this one was slow and sly, but there was nothing *half* about it—and waded through the press until he stood before me.

“Arjen.” He inclined his head, a subtle nod of acknowledgment and respect. “Have you taken an engagement for the evening?”

“No,” I blurted before I could help myself. My hand clenched on the banister, as though if only I could drag myself away I could be free of him.

“Will you have me?” He raised a purse fat and heavy with coin. He tossed it before I could answer, and I caught it out of instinct more than anything else. I’d have thrown it back at him, but perverse as he was, I rather suspected he’d only find amusement in such a display.

And if I could not give it back to him, I must accept it. I let my hand drop to my side, weighed down by the purse, and turned up the stairs again. “Come, then.”

I said nothing until we’d come to my room and he’d closed the door behind him, but then I could contain it no longer. “Why me?” I demanded, rounding on him. “You know I dislike you. Why would you choose me?”

He gave me a bright, carefree smile as he crossed to the shutters and ensured they were properly sealed. “Do you know, you’re one of the first to leave me alone for the entire night? I haven’t slept so well in longer than I care to remember. The women, they always wake me up trying to slide into bed with me.”

“They’re whores,” I told him with a shrug. “They don’t know what to do with a man in their beds, but to ply their trade.”

He set his hat on my bureau and watched me with eyes that shone with humor. “And you’re not a whore?”

If he expected to get a rise out of me, I surely must have disappointed him. “What I am is unconvinced. I’ve heard the stories, of course. I do not believe you can live up to what they say about you.”

He leaned back against the bureau, forearms braced behind him on its surface, one brow arched. "And what do they say about me? That I'm a virile wonder of a man, capable of pleasing a dozen women at once and showing even these jaded whores a trick or two that they've never seen before?"

"You jest, but you're not as far off the mark as you think."

"No? Well, then." He tugged the throat of his shirt open and left his necktie deposited next to his hat. "I'll have to count that as a blessing as well as a curse, I think."

Don't ask him, I commanded myself, feeling the pressure of the words against my lips. *He is baiting you. It's what he wants.* But I could not help myself. "How do you figure that?"

He waved a hand, a careless gesture that only those accustomed to power could manage. "You wouldn't have disliked me if my reputation hadn't preceded me. And then I'd never get any peace."

"You think highly of yourself. I daresay I'd have disliked you anyway, on your own merits."

"Perhaps." He boosted himself up and sat on my bureau. His eyes shone with humor in the lamplight. "But I doubt it."

I stared at him, his legs dangling, his boot heels drumming against my drawers. "What are you *doing*?"

He raised his brows at me, all innocence. "What?"

I strode forward, hands clenched at my sides at his sheer audacity. "Get down! If you think you can do whatever you please with my things just because you've bought me for the night, you picked the wrong whore. If that's what you want, you can go back downstairs and pick someone else." I did throw the purse at him then, like I'd wanted to do on the stairs. And he did laugh at me.

He set it next to him on the bureau top and looked down. "Arjen." He glanced at me through his lashes. His hair fell forward about his face, giving him a fey and wild look. "As you have already observed, I would be welcome in any bed in the city. If I wanted to be in one of them, I would not be here."

"No, of course," I scoffed. "You'd rather spend it alone in the bed of someone who doesn't want you there. Well, you're welcome to it." I spun for the door.

"Wait." He slid off my bureau, putting himself in front of me, so close I could hardly draw a breath without brushing against him.

"*Why*?"

He took up my hand, looked at it in bemusement as he matched our palms together and spread his fingers out along mine. "Because I asked you to?"

I stared at him, lips pressed to a thin line. "What do you want of me?" He curled his fingers through mine, clasping our hands together. Beneath my breast, my heart began to pound, and I wondered if this time he did not mean to refuse my services.

He turned his hand over, turning mine with it and baring the inside of my wrist, where I still kept a few light layers of bandages over his bite as it finished healing. "I want the same thing I did before."

I tugged against my hand experimentally, but he did not release it. “And no more?” I watched him through eyes narrowed with suspicion.

He laughed lightly. “Why would you think I’d want more?”

“You paid me more this time.”

“This time, I better know the value of what I’m purchasing.”

I resisted the impulse to roll my eyes, and pushed back against his hand instead, stretching my arm out. “Well, then?”

He shook his head and lightly touched his other hand to my bandages. “It’ll hurt you, if I reopen these wounds before they’re healed.”

I looked at him in consternation. “Do you think it didn’t hurt last time?”

He shook his head again, this time with impatience. “They will scar and heal badly.”

I marveled at how little he seemed to comprehend. “Do you think I would scruple at a few marks on my skin?”

Maikel sighed and gave me a look of exasperation. “It is quite difficult to feed through scar tissue.”

“Oh,” was all I could manage to say. I stared at him as the skin prickled along my spine, wondering if he meant what he seemed to imply. That he intended this to be a recurring engagement. That he meant to come back to me regularly.

This time when I tugged on my hand, he let me go. I held the other, uninjured, one out. He cupped his hand behind mine and brought it to his mouth, brushed his lips across the skin so gently I shuddered to think of the violence to come.

He kept his gaze slanted up, watching me, gauging my reaction as his lips parted and I tensed in anticipation. But he didn’t bite, only slid his tongue along my pulse, a lazy glide of heat followed by the chill of his breath as it blew on my damp skin.

I flinched back, unprepared for such a thing. But Maikel’s grip on me did not yield at all, and he drew me in with implacable strength. My other hand found his shoulder, braced against it, pushing. He only laughed softly, breath stuttering against my skin, hot now, like the air that came off a furnace.

His teeth nipped at my skin—normal, blunt teeth, not his fangs, not yet—scraping and licking and sucking until it flushed red, blood rising to the surface as though drawn to him the same way he was drawn to it. I groped behind me, blindly. My fingers found the windowsill, gripped it so tight my knuckles ached.

He moved in close. He’d have pressed his body to mine had my arm not been caught in the middle, keeping him at bay. I stumbled back, but Maikel never let me put distance between us. He bore me against the wall, my shoulder blades digging into the hard wood. He braced one arm on the wall by my head, so close I could smell the soap on him. With the other, he held my arm to his mouth and bent over it, and bit.

My whole body reacted, jerking as though I’d been struck by lightning. I wondered if I’d forgotten the pain, if time had dulled the memory, or if he was harsher now than he had been. I’d intended to let him

feed, to let him take this from me if he would not take the rest of what he'd paid for, even knowing that it would be an agony. But my body reacted of its own will, without thought from me, shoving at Maikel's shoulder and tugging fruitlessly at his coat, scrabbling at the lip of the window sill as though I might be able to drag myself away and win free of him. I was not weak, but my strength was no match to a vampire's. I might as well have been a mouse trying to overpower the cat who held it in its claws.

When my knees buckled, he dragged me back up with one hand and pinned me to the wall, growling with a sound that made the hair at my nape stand on end. It was a sound better suited to an animal, some great creature that stalked the forests and kept sane men huddling in their homes for protection. Not someone in a coat and a hat, with hair that brushed his collar and a smile that only showed its true brightness when startled out of him.

He sounded like Death, come to demand its due. No man should sound like that.

I stopped struggling, tremors making me shiver against him, hand clenched on a fistful of his coat. My fingers twitched against his cheek as he drank, every movement stabbing the needle-sharp points of his fangs deeper.

From the corner of my gaze, I watched his hand slowly curl into a fist, knuckles scraping against wood. He withdrew his fangs and raised his head, looking at me with dark, wild eyes. I tried to draw away and slip out from the small space left between him and the wall, but he pinned the back of my hand to the boards. Blood welled sluggishly from the wounds. He leaned in and lapped it up before it could drip down my arm, then sealed his mouth over my wrist and sucked without biting.

He'd removed the only barrier between us, and now his chest pressed intimately against mine, his whole body a long line of pressure down my own. His head was bent near mine, our cheeks so close they almost brushed. Every breath I took fluttered against his hair, sent a few slender strands dancing across my vision and catching on the sweat of my skin. His hand fell to my waist, holding me still and close. I closed my eyes. Carefully, deliberately, I unclenched my fingers and pulled my hand from his shoulder.

We might have been any two lovers in an impassioned embrace, bodies straining, too hasty to wait until we'd reached the bed. Might have been, but for the throb of my wrist and Maikel's steady suction, but for the way I could see, just at the edges of my vision, how his throat worked with every swallow.

"Maikel." It was a soft sound, but too hoarse for a whisper.

He made a noise against my skin that might have been meant as acknowledgement. I took the risk of assuming it was so, wet my dry lips and tried again to speak. "You will suck me dry."

This time, the sound he made seemed to be laughter, muffled against my skin. He drew away enough to answer me. "You can spare a bit more." His tongue dabbed at my wrist, once and then again, and again. I turned my head and spoke his name once more, watching the way his gaze slid to me but was pulled back to where he held my arm against the wall, as transfixed by the sight of those few drops of blood as a starving man at a lavish meal.

I gave an unsteady laugh and attempted a joke. “You will make me think you have not eaten in a week.”

He looked at me then, and kept looking, with a strange expression I could not read. His hand sprang open, releasing me, and he moved back two steps.

Slowly, I lowered my arm to my side. He stood in the middle of my room, watching me. When he still did not speak, I shrugged and sidled past him to my bureau and the fresh roll of bandages tucked within. I’d used up my supply in the past week and had had to beg more from the others. I sat on the edge of my bed to wrap the new bite, and thought ruefully that I would have to invest in a larger supply if Maikel intended to make regular visits.

This one was harder to bandage, with my other hand already wrapped and stiff. Maikel watched me wrap and unwrap and redo several times, before he strode over. He crouched before me and held down the end of the strip so it would not come loose.

“Thank you,” I said, glancing up at him. But it came out hasty and surprised, and I wondered if he’d think it insincere.

He nodded once, curt, and didn’t reply. But when I’d finished, he tied off the end of the bandage as well. He drew my arms out, stretched before me and held parallel against one another. He looked down at them with a faint smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. They were not quite matched, one wrapped lighter and looser, the other with a thicker layer over the fresh wound. He traced a finger down my forearm, from one end of the dressing to the other.

I pulled my arms back and tried to stand. “I’ll leave you to your rest—”

“Wait,” he said. “Not yet.”

I sat again. He was still on his knees before me, almost like a man at prayer, except that there was nothing penitent or reverent or even identifiable in his gaze, just an eerie stillness. “What?” I asked when a moment had passed and he didn’t make any further demands. “Do you want...something else of me?”

He glanced up and caught my gaze. The corners of his eyes creased a little. “Not that, no.” He rose, stretched his back, and leaned a hip against the foot of my bed. “I am not ready to retire just yet, that’s all.”

I frowned up at him, bewildered. “What do you want of me, then?”

He shrugged carelessly, turning his gaze around the room. I could not fathom what might be so interesting about such a sparse, unfurnished place, but he took it in as though gazing on a mountain vista. “Talk to me,” he said over his shoulder.

“About *what*?” I demanded.

“Anything.”

I stared at his back, at a loss. I could not imagine that anything about me, a whore, might be of interest to a man such as him. Not my room, and surely not my life. Desperate, I blurted out the first question that came to mind. “How old are you?”

“One hundred seventy-four,” he said without a pause, but the words were strange and stilted, toneless, like the response to a question asked and answered so many times that it’s become rote, memorized, and no longer held any meaning.

I stared at his profile. His gaze continued to flick about the room, his expression one of mild interest and puzzlement, as though this barren room held more interest than nearly two centuries of his own life. “What on earth do you do to pass the time?” I wondered to myself, marveling at the idea of so very much of it.

He stilled. Slowly, he turned to face me, his brows drawn together. “What did you say?”

I shifted on the bed, edging back, uncertain what his expression meant, what mood it foretold. “I said, what do you do to pass the time?”

He took much longer in answering this question, and his gaze grew distant, no longer looking at my walls, no longer looking at anything at all. “I...read. I traveled. I...I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” My voice climbed, incredulous. “Nearly two hundred years, and you don’t know?”

He rocked back, staring at me in surprise. His expression went through a strange series of transformations and settled at last on one of wry amusement. “Do you think I have kept a ledger of it all? Two hundred years of breakfasts and social calls? Who would be interested in such a thing?” he asked, his tone lightly mocking. “It would be dreadfully dull.”

“Do you think so?” I demanded sharply. “You lived it.” I rose, tugging at the edge of my bandage. “Are you ready to rest now?”

He watched me from the edge of his gaze for a long moment. “No. I don’t believe I am,” he said at last.

I threw my hands up in frustration. “What do you want of me?”

“Talk to me! Just talk to me.”

“For God’s sake, about what?”

He shook his head quickly. “I don’t care. Anything. Tell me about—about what you do on normal days, when I don’t come and interrupt your routine. *Anything*.”

I sighed and sat on the bed, and he sat too. Slowly, uncertainly, I began to speak. I told him how I slept through the day, much like he did, because we did better business at night. I told him, haltingly, about some of my regular patrons, the more pleasant ones, and a few I thought might make him laugh.

It didn’t help, perhaps because I was so tense myself, bewildered by his strange request. He only grew more restless and fidgeted about on my bed as though unable to get comfortable, until I began to wonder whether he might keep me here the whole day long, speaking endlessly of the most trivial matters until my voice gave out.

He did not, much to my relief. As dawn neared he grew obviously exhausted, if no less restless. At length, as one story drew to a close, I hesitated before starting another and looked down at him. “Will that do?” I asked softly. “May I go now?”

“Yes.” He rolled onto his side, away from me. “That will do.”

I left him to his sleep, and thought it merely a strange mood that had gripped him. But the next week when he came again, he pinned me to the wall and growled, “Talk to me, Arjen,” before he sank his fangs into my wrist.

And so I did, week after week, until it seemed like any other pattern in my life, like the nightly trek downstairs to wait in the parlor or my regular trips to buy fresh rolls from the bakery that sat on the skirts of De Wallen—Maikel’s fangs in me, his hands on me tight, holding me still as my body bowed against his with the pain, the rough rumble of his voice in my ear demanding, “*Talk to me,*” over and over, until I blurted out anything I could make myself think of, anything that might ease his strange moods and let me retire to my own rest.

I told him about the terrible boredom of waiting for patrons to arrive, of my friendship with Elise and how greedily she demanded her own tales of my vampire patron. I told him how she cheated at draughts, and how I knew but let her do it anyway because she reminded me of a friend I’d had as a child. I told him everything I could think of about my life, but there was only so much to tell when one did the same thing night after night, week after week. Still, he was insatiable, and whenever my flow of words seemed to slow he’d slam me back against whatever surface he’d pinned me to and demand, “*Talk to me!*”

Desperate and dazed by the intensity of his bite, I stared out over his shoulder through the open window, where dawn was starting to leach the color from the sky. And, floundering for something to appease him, I began to stammer about the corner of bridge that I could see through it, the way its lights glowed in the night and reflected from the canal below. But it only made Maikel more restless, more agitated.

So I broke off and babbled instead about how different it looked in the day, washed in light, and how the sun-baked stones held their heat for hours even after the sun set. To my surprise, that at last seemed to settle him. His fingers eased on me, relaxing to a gentler grip. I continued on in a desperate rush, not wanting to lose this unexpected advantage. I told him about how the paint on the bridge’s rail was peeling back to reveal silvered, weathered wood, and had been for years, and how everyone agreed that someone ought to repaint it but no one had done anything about it yet, and how daffodils were filling the city these days, as golden as the sun. As the weeks continued and the daffodils faded, I told him about the budding tulips, and that I preferred roses for their scent, and the way the sun felt on my face in the middle of the day, the way it made my skin feel hot and dry and crisp as parchment.

I told him anything I could think of, anything that he might have missed or forgotten after a hundred and seventy-four years spent in the dark. I even told him, blushing with chagrin and spitting the words

through clenched teeth, how I'd started noticing these things as they happened, and thinking, *Maikel would like to hear that. I ought to remember it for him.*

Week after week I talked to him, more words than I thought any one person could have inside them. And when I returned to my room one night after he'd gone and saw he'd left a single crimson rose lying on my pillow, as dark as blood, I found I could not speak at all.

Chapter Three

The next week, as the night neared, I found myself snapping at anyone who crossed my path. At last, when I had injured a dozen feelings and even the girls who usually liked me best would not invite me to sit with them, I decided the only thing to do was remove myself until I was fit for company again. I returned to my room, shut the door firmly, and reminded myself not for the first time that even Maikel's generous compensation was not worth the aggravation of his company. Let him choose another, I thought fiercely. He was not wanting for options. Surely he could find one amongst the lot who pleased him.

It was nearly dawn, and I had begun to let myself think that I may have avoided him entirely, when my bedroom door swung open and in he strode, bold as you please. I repressed a sigh and stood to face him. Over his shoulder I could see that my door still stood open, and that the hall beyond was empty. I snorted. "Where are your admirers?"

His grin was pure wickedness. "They have found something else to sigh over."

I huffed in quiet skepticism. There was nothing in this world as sure to make people lose their heads as a vampire.

When I did not rise to his bait, he leaned back against my wall, watching me from beneath a hooded gaze, and his grin turned to a smirk. "They whisper about us, you know."

I raised my head. "The girls?"

"Perhaps they started it." He shrugged, but there was a glint in his eye, and I knew he enjoyed the speculation. "And told their patrons, and their patrons told their wives, and their wives told their neighbors. The city herself echoes with rumor."

I sat back, hands braced behind me on the mattress. He had not even offered to buy my time yet, and I was humoring him. What on earth was happening to me? "Rumor? About us?"

"Because I ask for you, again and again. You and no other. They imagine a great, torrid affair between us, and I swear I've heard no less than half a dozen variations of the tale." His face was bright with mirth. "Some say you are aloof, and I return to you because I cannot bear to be denied. Others say that I was charmed by your skill, that you have done what no one else in all of Amsterdam has managed and captured my heart. Can you imagine?"

He laughed at the idea of it as I rose and crossed the room. His laughter broke off abruptly when I dropped to my knees before him. The smile melted from his face. "What are you doing?"

“And what is the truth of the story?” I demanded, curling my hands around his calves. “Have I done what no other has managed and captured your heart?”

“Don’t flatter yourself.” He rocked back, but the wall was behind him and he could not go far.

“Is it the challenge, then? The lure of the forbidden?” I slid my palms up his thighs. “Would you leave me be if I took you to bed?”

“Stop that.” He knocked my hands away. “The forbidden? I have never even asked it of you!”

“No. You haven’t.” I sat back on my haunches, staring up at him, lips pressed tight. “So why do you return to me, again and again, when there are plenty of beds out there available to you? Why leave a lover’s token if all I am to you is a quiet bed to sleep in?”

“A what?” Every expression slid from his face, leaving it blank with incomprehension. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t play the fool with me.” I strode across the room and tore my bureau drawer open, snatched out the rose that he had left and I had hung to dry at Elise’s behest. Its leaves were fragile now, its petals turned dark and brittle. A thorn pricked my finger and Maikel’s gaze dragged toward it, but only for a moment. He stared at the rose, his gaze transfixed with horror.

“What is that?” he demanded unsteadily.

“You should know. You left it for me.”

“Oh God...” He crossed the distance between us with faltering steps. “What have you done to it?”

I frowned and let him take the rose from me. I tried to bring my finger to my mouth, to suck at the small wound the thorn had given me. But Maikel’s hand stopped me, and he drew it instead to his own mouth. I shuddered at the warmth of it, at the feel of his tongue gently laving over my skin. “I let it dry, is all. The girls about killed me when I mentioned throwing it out.” Of course, knowing what I now did about the tales they’d been spreading, I was less inclined to think their romanticism as harmless as I had moments before.

Maikel continued to stare at the flower with a gaze that grew darker by the moment. “This... You should not have done this. What is the point? It is only a skeleton now.” Gingerly, he touched the edge of one desiccated petal. “Some things are not meant to be kept forever.”

“Take it, then, if you want,” I said, bewildered. “Or throw it out. Maikel, you haven’t answered me.” I knelt again and spread my hands over his thighs. When he tried to retreat, I grabbed fistfuls of his clothes and held him where he was. “Tell me!”

He set the rose aside with great care, as though afraid of damaging it. “It is not a lover’s token. You said you liked roses. I thought you would like it, that’s all.”

“I did,” I admitted. He was hard despite his protests, straining against his trousers. I ran my hand over him through the fabric. He closed his eyes and reached behind him, groping for the wall. “It made me laugh, and it made me smile, with the simple pleasure of it.”

“Arjen,” he said unsteadily and opened his eyes. He gently slid his fingers through my hair. I watched the transformation as his gaze hardened, cooled, as the smirk that hid the warmth of his true smile tugged at his lips. “Perhaps the gossips only got it backwards,” he murmured in an entirely different tone of voice. “Perhaps it is you who cannot help but rise to the challenge of being denied. We have not even broached the subject of payment, and here you are on your knees before me—”

I rose swiftly and struck him across the cheek, hard enough to make my palm sting. He gaped at me. “I do not want your damned money. I want you to answer me.”

Carefully, he fingered his jaw. There was something new and strange in his gaze, sharp, intent enough to make me wary. “I do believe I’ve forgotten the question.”

I dropped to my knees once more. When he tried to move, I shoved him back against the wall. “One small pleasure in exchange for another,” I snarled. My fingers worked deftly to unfasten his trousers. “I’ll not be beholden to you, Maikel van Triet.”

He started to speak, but stopped abruptly when I drew him out and held his phallus in my hand. I waited, but he did not protest again.

I slid forward, bracing my hands on his hipbones to hold him against the wall. My breath washed over him. He made a sound in the back of his throat and moved against me, hips flexing. I leaned forward, bearing him back with my weight, and took the tip of him into my mouth.

He stopped moving, stopped *breathing*. His hands fisted in my hair, tugging, not enough to really hurt. I stroked him with my tongue, long, slow sweeps that laved the salt from his skin. On my knees, eyes closed, his hands in my hair like a demand, he might have been any patron. But even that was a lie. No one strained like this to keep me *away*.

My strength was no match to his. I couldn’t have forced anything on him if he truly wished to pull me away. But even the pretense of resistance fueled my determination. I drew him deeper, letting him fill my mouth. My tongue played over him, drawing strangled sounds and muffled cries. His hips bucked against my restraint. I tore his trousers down around his knees and dug my fingers into skin, forcing him still.

“Arjen.” His voice was rough, raw.

“Be quiet,” I said and took him deeper.

His head fell back against the wall. His hands slipped from my hair to my neck, my shoulders. He grabbed at me as I stroked my tongue over the sensitive underbelly of his erection, fingers pressing hard against bone. He gave a single, sharp cry when I dragged a hand down between his thighs and cradled his sac, feeling the weight of it in my palm. He spoke again but I didn’t reprimand him, didn’t even notice the words. I recognized the tone, though. Hungry. Pleading.

I worked my mouth over him, taking him as deep as I could, using my tongue to press him against the roof of my mouth as I moved out, then in again. He gasped and arched hard, back rising off the wall. I curved my hands around his waist and pulled him sharply against me. I took all of him, dragged tongue and

lips and cheeks over him. Then I drew away completely, leaving him with only the slow stroke of my fist and my breath washing over his damp skin.

He made a gruff, unhappy sound and scowled down at me. I tightened my fingers around him and swept my thumb over his glans. A shudder went through him, and his expression lost some of its fierceness.

Pressing his erection against his stomach, I sucked at the sensitive skin underneath, kissed a slow path down to the sac that hung beneath. I wrapped my hand around his shaft, letting him thrust into my grip as I lapped and sucked. His gaze lingered on me like a physical touch as I placed a gentle kiss on tender flesh. It was, I thought, perhaps the first time he had truly let me see him, without masks or pretenses or sarcasm to hide behind. As soon as I had the thought he seemed to have the same one, for he dropped his head back, looking up at the ceiling, and the moment was gone.

I pressed my mouth to him and caught a bit of skin with my next kiss, nipped at it carefully with my teeth. He sucked in air through his teeth and jerked against me, thrust his hands deep into my hair again and pulled me hard against him.

I kissed his stomach. My tongue toyed with the edge of his navel, teasing him, until he took my head between his hands and held it steady as he shifted, brushing the tip of his cock against my lips.

I parted and took him deep, then drew back again so that it was just the head in my mouth. My hand pumped along his shaft as I sucked at him. He growled and jerked me forward so hard I had to slap a hand to the wall to keep from losing my balance.

“Christ,” he gasped. “Arjen—”

The last half of my name was lost in an inarticulate noise when I drew my tongue over him. I took him into my mouth, sliding out and back and out again, licking and sucking. His hands fisted on air and his knuckles turned white. He strained against me, gasping, and I drove him on relentlessly until he shuddered at last and gave a sharp cry, and the salty heat of his semen filled my mouth. Swallowing it, I sat back and continued to slow stroke him until he pushed my hands away.

I pushed myself to my feet. Maikel watched me through eyes narrowed to slits, his chest heaving, sweat plastering pieces of hair to his cheeks. Slowly, his customary lopsided grin pulled his smile sideways, until there was nothing left at all of his own expression.

“A small pleasure, is it?” He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the wall. “You’re not charging enough.”

I let it pass without comment, watching him. He toed off his boots and shucked his trousers off the rest of the way, shed his coat and shirt and climbed into my bed, all the while without looking at me. He rolled onto his side, his back toward me. I stared at the way his hair curled at the nape of his neck.

“Don’t you want to talk?” I asked after a moment.

“No.” He spoke to my wall. “That will be all, Arjen.”

I stared at him a moment longer, then looked out at the night, lanterns glowing like stars against the dark sky. My gaze snapped back to Maikel. “Shouldn’t I close the shutters?”

“If you like.” He still didn’t move, nor show any other reaction.

I strode across the room and shut them fast, staring at him with every step. Finished, I lingered, frowning down at him. He said nothing else, so I turned and left, a strange feeling twisting in the pit of my stomach.

Two days later I was waiting for patrons in the parlor, watching from the corners of my vision as Elise rearranged pieces on the draughts board to her advantage, when I heard someone speak Maikel’s name.

I turned automatically. My gaze landed on a knot of other girls, their heads bowed together in gossip. Hedy seemed to be at their center, her face bright with the tale she was telling.

“What did you say?” I asked, rising and coming to join them.

She looked up at me, uncertainty washing across her face. “I was just saying that Griet told me that Maikel van Triet came to their establishment last night, and went upstairs with one of their boys, and later that morning Jan came down all a-twitter and he said—”

I turned away, not listening to the rest of the tale, which could go for hours like as not with no point at all. I walked slowly back to my seat with Elise and saw that she had placed her pieces so that, on my move, I had no choice but to sacrifice one of my men to her advance.

“What was that?” she asked me, the picture of innocence.

“Just gossip about patrons, like always.” I slid a man forward, setting her up to jump two of mine at once. “Nothing important.”

The next day’s gossip carried his name to me again, this time rumors that he had visited another brothel farther down the canal and paid one of the girls for three full nights in advance. “Like she was running an inn,” Elise cried, her eyes wide with delight. The night after, we learned that he had left that girl with her three-nights fee and gone to another house entirely. And the one after that, they said he had taken himself back to Jan’s bed and plied him with the sweetest charm and most outrageous promises, until at last Jan could not help but relent and let him into his bed again.

When a week had passed, I waited for him as I had every week before, without even thinking about, and marveled at what strange mood had gripped him, to send him flitting about all over De Wallen like that, and whether it might be gripping him still, and what it meant for me.

As the night wore on and dawn began to color the edges of the sky, the parlor grew empty as girls made their way to bed, with or without partners. I stared out at the golden light on the water and realized that he was not coming.

I returned to my room and sat on my bed, wondering if I had finally succeeded in ridding myself of him. But it seemed strange to sleep in my own bed this night, when I had grown so used to it being occupied and unavailable.

I scoffed a little at my behavior and told myself that any regret I felt was simply because I'd grown accustomed to having his weekly fee filling my coffer. I looked down at my wrists, wrapped in bandages that had become so omnipresent that I'd ceased to notice them, and felt half-dressed without them.

I tugged absently at the edge of one bandage. He hadn't fed from me, the last time he'd come. The wounds they covered were two and three weeks old now, mostly faded. They didn't need the dressings any longer. Still, it also seemed strange to think of removing them and not immediately replacing them with clean ones.

The next day brought a tizzy of speculation. All the girls knew he usually came to me and that this time he had not, and most had heard that he'd visited some other establishment, though none could agree on whose. Elise said that her friend at Drika's had seen him push a boy back against the wall and bite him right there in the middle of the stairwell, pay him for the full night, then leave five minutes later, though everyone else in the parlor agreed that it surely wasn't possible.

The rumors only grew worse as the days went on, and the worse they got, the more everyone delighted in passing them about, until they flew so fast and thick that I felt I couldn't breathe.

Two weeks from the last time I had seen Maikel, I came downstairs with my shoulders squared, having firmly reminded myself that it was a night like any other, and I would do my job as I did every night. I heard the clamor in the parlor from the first landing, and came down to find Maikel himself at the center of it.

The girls were crowded about him, as they always were. Elise and Hedy and a few others had found their way to the center of the group and were vying hardest for his attention. He laughed and urged them on, promising his patronage to the one who made him the sweetest offer. Most of the girls in the parlor were laughing as well, thinking it great sport, but the ones fighting to earn his fee were grave and sent one another cutting looks.

As I came down the stairs, all attention turned from the girls, and everyone looked to me as though this were some sort of drama taking place on a stage, and I was the scorned lover come to confront my erstwhile beloved.

I was not. I was just a whore, nothing else. Nothing more.

Later, they told me that Maikel stared at me all the while. But I did not look at him again as I walked through the edges of the crowd and out into the night, whispers floating behind me like a train.

Chapter Four

Two more weeks passed, and each day the rumors flew faster and the stories they told grew more outrageous. They said he had rented a permanent room in a brothel purely to shock his acquaintances by giving them an address in De Wallen, when they cared to ask for one; he had stumbled out of a brothel in the wee hours of the morning and only avoided the sunrise because another whore had dragged him to her bed; he had walked clear through De Wallen and back into the city proper, and propositioned a young noble lad as though he were an ordinary streetwalker; he had been thrown out of the Three Sisters, despite his status, and the barkeep refused to give reason why, but now he kept his maiden daughter hidden away from the paying customers, and his son as well.

I thought I might go mad with all the stories they told, and worst of all was the mark he'd left amongst us. For Elise and Hedy had become bitter rivals. Hedy told anyone who'd stop long enough to listen that Elise had only won his patronage because she'd offered to give it to him for free, and Elise called her a jealous old bat and insisted that it was Hedy's face that had made Maikel scorn her, and no fault of Elise's. I no longer played draughts in the evening, for Elise was often too busy watching out the windows for some sign of him, or glaring at Hedy's back from across the room, and even when she was not she was poor company.

I was probably no better. I kept to myself for the most part, primarily because I did not want to hear each new, lascivious rumor, and I no longer hesitated to stand and walk away if someone tried to bring the rumors to me. The girls began to keep their distance and whisper behind their hands when I passed by. I ignored them all, as I ignored all the rest of it, back stiff and straight and face devoid of any emotion but pleasantness. I plied my trade and earned my keep, and when I could I locked myself away in my room where it was blessedly quiet.

I was sequestered in my room again one night when there was a commotion from somewhere within the brothel. I paid little attention, thinking it a patron who had grown rowdy or another spat between the girls. The shouts grew louder, though, and nearer, and resolved into my name.

Startled, I stepped out into the hall. Elise was coming toward me and Maikel was with her, leaning heavily against her side, though her room was at the other end of the brothel. When she saw me, she released a great sigh. "Arjen, come take this fool from me. I've better things to do than play nursemaid all night."

I didn't move from my doorway. "I thought he was sharing your bed, these days," I said coldly.

Maikel's head lifted, his gaze seeking me out, dazed and unfocused as he tried to hold his coat closed over his chest.

"He won't have me. It's you he asks for, and he says he won't leave until he's seen you." She heaved him up and pushed him forward into my arms before I could protest. He stumbled like a drunkard, and I moved without thought to catch him.

Elise looked down at her dress, smeared crimson all along the front, and made a disgusted sound. "I smell like a *butcher*. Who will give me patronage now?"

I helped Maikel into my room, leaving Elise to her own troubles. He stumbled over a floorboard and half-fell into my bed. I pushed and prodded at him until he rolled over onto his back, and then I stood back and gaped down at him.

He was covered in blood, soaked in it, dripping with it, more than he had taken from me in all the time I'd known him. "Whose is this?" I demanded of him. "Maikel! Whose blood is this?"

"Mine." His voice sounded like someone else's entirely, thin and reedy.

I stared at him, aghast. "Not all of it." Surely even a vampire could not survive losing *that* much blood.

"Yes." He tried to rise onto his elbow, but only managed it halfway before he collapsed back onto the mattress. "It's mine. Arjen—"

I was moving toward him before he'd even finished speaking my name, hating myself with every step but unable to do anything else. "What happened to you?"

"It was a whore. Can you believe it?" He tried to wave a hand, but it shook unbearably when he lifted it from the bed. "She tried to *stake* me." Thin as his voice was, I could still hear the incredulity on his tone.

"I can't imagine why she would want to do that," I said dryly, turning away to pour water from my ewer into a washbasin.

He gave a short, sharp laugh. "It seems I said something...unfortunate...in the heat of the moment while with her neighbor, and she felt I owed her the same."

I did not ask what the promises were, only dropped a rag into the water and let it soak. After a moment passed, he told me anyway. "She thinks I offered to turn the other. To give her eternity." He stared up at my ceiling as he spoke, and his words had a lilting, dreamy quality. "I'm quite sure she's wrong. Why would I promise her such a thing? Why would I...do that?"

I kept my head bowed over the basin as I wrung water from the rag. "It's a common enough desire. I'm sure every whore you've slept with has asked you for it, at one point or another." I brought the rag and basin to the bedside and sat at his side, then simply stared down at him, at a loss for how to start cleaning up this mess.

“Not you.” Maikel watched me through half-closed eyes. He moved suddenly, and this time he did manage to get his elbows beneath him and push himself up, leaning toward me intently. “Do you want it? I would do it—for you—if you asked me—”

I rocked back, my heart beating fast beneath my breast. A month before, the offer might have been a temptation. Not much of one—I liked the taste of sweet rolls and the smell of roses in bloom and the feel of the sun upon my face too well—but I’d have considered it before I turned him down.

But a month before, I had not realized what a shallow, flighty creature Maikel van Triet was. “Why would I want that?” I asked harshly, pulling back his shirt so I could see what the true damage was. “What use is eternity when you’re all alone?”

He flinched as though I’d struck him and dropped back onto the bed.

“I suppose I should have thanked her, then,” he said, barely loud enough to hear. I wiped at his chest with the damp rag, but he swatted me away. “Stop that. Stop it. What’s the point?”

“The point?” Unpleasantness twisted in my belly like a viper. “Why did you come here, Maikel?” My voice came out harsh, shaking with temper. “Why did you ask for me?”

He turned his face away and didn’t answer me.

I shot to my feet, shaking. “No. You’ll answer me this time. Why did you come here? *Why?* To die in my bed?”

“I couldn’t... I...” He shuddered and tried to curl onto his side. “I couldn’t think of where else to go.”

I stared at his back, the fabric of his coat stretched across his shoulders, dark with blood. The blankets beneath him were vivid with it. “Get up.” I strode back and pulled at his blood-soaked garments until he obeyed. “Sit up, damn it. If I don’t get this off you, it’ll dry and you’ll stick to the linens, and then I’ll never be rid of you.”

He sat up, swaying, and leaned forward to brace his elbows on his knees. I pulled his coat off, tore his shirt off over his head, and forced him to stand while I stripped the soiled blankets from the bed. “Sit,” I snapped at him over my shoulder as I threw the bundle of laundry into the corner. He lowered himself onto the edge of my mattress, gripping the bedpost with white-knuckled fingers. “I’m washing you off, and if you utter one word of protest, I swear I’ll finish what that other whore started.”

He didn’t argue, only watched me quietly, shivering. I put the basin down beside him and started scrubbing his skin, too discomfited to be gentle. I watched the runnels of water drip down his chest, turning pink with blood. I couldn’t look at the wound on his shoulder, flesh torn and red and raw.

He drew short, shallow breaths as I washed him, his chest shuddering beneath my hand with each one. “Why *did* you come?” I demanded at last.

He gave a pained laugh. “Better to ask me why I didn’t.”

I stilled and looked up at him. “Is that what brought you here? Guilt? You think I’ve been—”

"I ought to apologize," he said, wheezing, chest heaving, for all the world like a man on his deathbed, trying to make amends before it was too late. I threw the rag from me and wrapped my arms about my ribs.

"I'm sure you owe an apology to any number of people." I rose and dumped the bloodied water out the window, refilled it with what was left in the ewer. "But I can't imagine what you think you need to apologize to me for."

"Can't you?" He turned to watch me as I moved about the room. I glanced back and caught a glimpse of his old self in his expression, wry and warm and amused.

"You've never done anything to me." I returned slowly to the bedside. "Nothing that I didn't trade away freely. You made me no promises you haven't kept."

"And that's all your world is, is it?" His lips twisted with an expression that ought to have been a smile, but there was no humor in it. "Barter and trades, this for that, and so long as the accounts balance in the end, it's no matter at all?" He gave a hoarse laugh. "That's a hell of a way to live."

"And this?" I demanded, snatching up the rag and scrubbing at his skin again. "Bandyng about with whores like you've no one better to spend your time with, paying for company and then sending it away, amusing yourself by making desperate girls miserable? Is *that* any way to live?"

"No." He closed his eyes and sank deeper into the mattress. "It's not." He raised a hand, fingered the wound over his breast. Just the thought made me cringe, but he didn't react like he even felt it. "It's a hell of a way to die."

I stared down at him for a long moment, the rag forgotten in my hand, dripping water on my floor. "If that's what you've resigned yourself to, then I may as well throw the shutters open and be done with it."

He didn't even tell me not to, only closed his eyes and gave a soft sigh.

I threw the rag down in disgust and hauled the basin off the bed, left it on the floor where it wouldn't spill. "You're not dying, you damned stubborn ass. Not in my bed." I wrenched my sleeve up to my elbow and thrust my arm out before him. He blinked at me, brows drawn with confusion. I may as well have been speaking in tongues.

"Feed, damn it." I grabbed him by the hair and shoved my wrist against his mouth. "Do what you must, and *live*."

With excruciating reluctance, he brought his hand up, laced his fingers through mine, his grip so familiar it made a pang shoot through my breast. But he didn't bite, just held me there, breathing against my skin. His lashes fluttered against his cheeks, then lifted. He looked up at me and whispered against my wrist.

"Arjen. Talk to me."

I groaned and dropped my head back. "Don't ask that of me. I have nothing to say to you that you'll care to hear."

"*Talk to me.*"

I glared down at him. “Shall I tell you what a fool you are, Maikel van Triet? Shall I *tell* you the stories they say about you, or how they whisper behind their hands and—” He bit, fangs piercing, sinking deep. I jerked, but the pain was familiar by now, almost a comfort, and not enough to slow the torrent of words he had loosed within me. “—and wonder what’s happened to you, to turn you into such a cad. Not even Elise cares to have you in her bed anymore, you know. All you do is play games, and the city grows tired of them.” His mouth worked on my wrist, sucking, drawing the blood he needed from me. My eyes burned, and I dwindled off to a fierce whisper. “All you have *ever* done is play games.”

He made a sound against my skin that might have been denial.

“You find a whore who cannot stand you,” I hissed, “and pay him for a night’s companionship just to watch him squirm, then send him away so you can delight in his confusion. You pit friends against one another and turn them to bitter rivals, you make meaningless demands just to watch others jump at your whim, you get the whole city talking purely for the satisfaction of hearing your name on a thousand lips. They are all games, Maikel, every one of them.”

He withdrew his fangs from me and sucked gently at the wound until it had stopped bleeding. Then he raised his head and looked at me. “Not the first,” he whispered.

I turned my face away. “Keep feeding. You’ve hardly taken any.”

“I’ve taken enough.”

“Enough for what? Enough to stumble down the road to the next brothel and some other whore you’ve given reason to hate you? You need *more*, damn it.”

He blinked at me, leaning in, suddenly much too close, his lashes brushing against my cheek with every sweep. “Do you hate me?” he breathed.

“I don’t hate you.” I forced the words through my throat. “I just don’t like you.”

His breath washed over me, a wave of heat. I closed my eyes and held myself as still as stone, refusing to lean in to his temptation.

“I’ll take more,” he whispered, “if you’ll let me.” And placed a delicate kiss on the side of my throat.

I jerked back, shoved my arm out before me. “You’ll take more from there.”

“The same place, so soon?” He touched a fingertip lightly to one of the small punctures, but still I flinched. “It will hurt.”

“It will hurt either way.”

“No.” His expression softened with a smile, one of the rare ones, warm and gentle. “It will not.” He brushed his thumb over the spot he’d kissed. “I can make it so you’ll want me to do it again and again.”

“That’s a lie.” I crossed my arms again and leaned away from him. “Told by besotted girls with more sentimentalism than sense.”

“Then prove me wrong.” He drew me back with a gentle grip that allowed no resistance. His head bent, his hair brushing my jaw. He sucked tenderly at the same spot on my throat.

“Promise me,” I choked out, and I did not know whether he or I was the more surprised. “Promise you’ll leave me alone—you’ll leave *us* alone. All of us. Stop playing these games. Find your amusement somewhere other than De Wallen. Let us *be*.”

“Arjen.” He pressed his brow to my shoulder. “All you ever had to do was say was no.”

I closed my eyes, my whole body tight and trembling, braced for his bite. “Promise,” I growled, “and be done with it.”

“I promise,” he said quietly. “I’ll leave you be, if that’s what you want.”

I nodded once and let my head fall back.

He twined his fingers through my hair, guiding me forward, and molded his body against mine. I shuddered when his lips touched my throat, grasped blindly at his shoulder when they parted, digging my fingers in deep, waiting for the agony of his bite.

The sharp tips of his fangs pricked at my skin, and I made a sound like a sob.

He bit hard, drove his fangs deep. My body jerked, twisted, my hands tore at him. My breath left me on a long, unsteady cry. He grabbed a handful of hair at my nape and held me tight against him, sucking greedily at my throat.

And then, as I was thinking that Maikel could not have been more wrong and that I would tell him, just as soon as I could remember how to speak, that it was too much to bear and I would never suffer a vampire’s bite again, not for all the guilders in the land... In that moment, as I was drawing a breath and remembering how to form sounds, the ferocious burning of the bite changed into a different sort of fire entirely.

It was like the lighting of a thousand candles, a sudden flare of brightness and beauty so intense that I was speechless in awe of it. I gave a shocked cry and pressed forward against Maikel, blindly seeking more. He kept his fingers twisted at my nape, but his other hand slid down my chest, pulling at my shirt, baring my stomach. The first touch of his hands on my skin made me jump. I leaned forward into his touch, whimpering. He unbuttoned the shirt hastily and tugged it off my shoulders. When I was bare-chested he clasped me tight against him, skin to skin. My arms came around him, clutching tight, and he made a low purring sound against my throat.

He shifted forward, bearing me down onto my back, his hand slipping down to the front of my trousers. I threw an arm around his neck to hold him in place against me, no longer remembering that I didn’t like him and this hadn’t been part of our bargain. All I knew was that I needed more. My hips arched up against his palm, pressing him to me.

Maikel’s fingers worked deftly at my trousers, despite the awkwardness of doing it one-handed. When the last came undone, he made a fierce, victorious sound against my throat and shoved them down my hips. He wrapped his hand about me and stroked.

I bowed up against him, crying out, sensation shooting through me like a rain of sparks.

I dragged a hand down his back, fingers bumping along the knots of his spine, curling into the narrow spot at his waist. I tugged at his trousers with considerably less grace than he had mine, but somehow managed to get them down all the same. My fingers lingered in the hollow of his hips, climbed up his ribs to his chest. Instead of that terrible, raw wound, I found only smooth, fresh skin, healed by the gift of my blood.

I knew. I knew that's what would happen, that that's what my blood would do to him. It was why I'd offered. But even knowing, I still found it shocking. I ran my hands across the healed wound over and over, amazed at the transformation.

When Maikel withdrew his fangs, I shuddered. My fingers clutched at him, straining. I wanted to tell him not to stop, to bite me again, to do whatever it took to keep this fire raging. He licked my throat, then drew back and looked down at me with a gaze that smoldered.

"I'm still hungry," he whispered, settling his hips in against mine. "Will you feed this hunger too?"

I should have told him to honor his promise and leave me be. I should have told him any number of things. But I stared up at him, my heart hammering, his skin burning against mine, and I couldn't think of any of them. I buried my hands in his hair and jerked his mouth down to mine.

He kissed me hard and fast, claiming my mouth with a greediness that matched my own. I rose up against him, demanding everything he gave and more, until at last I had to break away, gasping.

Maikel curved his body over mine, dusting my face with kisses as light as snowflakes as he thrust his hips against me, flesh sliding against flesh. I dragged my hands down his back, curved my fingers around his backside and pulled him sharply against me. He groaned, then laughed breathlessly and nuzzled my throat.

"I never should've sent you away, that first night."

I arched my neck up to his kiss. "So much for wanting a decent night's sleep." He laved his tongue over my collarbone. I twisted my fingers in his hair and urged him lower. "And hating having whores in your bed, stealing the covers and—" His tongue found my nipple, circled it lazily. I broke off with a low groan. "—and waking you up."

"It would've been worth it." He kissed down my stomach, let his tongue play with the edge of my navel. And braced the heels of his palms on my hips, so that when he slid lower and wrapped his lips around my cock, and my body jerked forward, trying to thrust into the heat of his mouth, I was pinned in place and could not move at all.

My head swam, dizzy with the pleasure of his kiss. I reached down and tangled my hands in his hair, and used the grip to jerk him forward. He braced himself up on his elbows and took more of me, laughing gently, another torment against my aching flesh.

He enveloped me slowly, a fraction at a time, waiting until I was desperate and groaning before taking a little bit more and driving me that much closer to madness. All I knew was his mouth, the heat of him

surrounding me, the soft glide of his tongue. I bit my lip hard enough to leave dents, muffling the sounds that worked their way from my throat. He slid his hands over my thighs, up to caress my stomach. One curled around the base of my cock and followed the motions of his mouth on my flesh, stroking as he sucked me deep and then withdrew.

My body writhed beneath his attentions, drawn out on a rack of pleasure. I stuffed a fist in my mouth and groaned, chest heaving. My hips twitched against his restraint, but he allowed me no recourse, no opportunity to take over his pace and turn it to my own.

His mouth slipped off me. "Arjen," he breathed, pumping his hand along my length. I raised my head and saw him smiling down at me. "Talk to me."

"You talk. I am through with it."

Slowly, the smile faded from his expression, leaving only intensity behind. He crawled up the length of my body until he held himself above me, knees straddled on either side of my hips, the whole weight of his body pressing mine to the bed. "Shall I?" he murmured and bent to kiss the edge of my cheek. "Shall I tell you what's been on my mind, these past few months?"

"Tell me what you like," I gasped, hauling his mouth down against my skin. "I am sick of words."

"Do you have any idea," he asked, lowering his weight over me, "what you looked like? You were so haughty. *Disdainful*." He laughed against my skin. "Do you know how long it's been since someone looked at me with disdain? How could I resist?"

I gaped up at him, only half-listening, much more distracted by the feel of him above me, bearing down, reaching one hand back to angle me against his entrance. "I'll hurt you," I whispered, pushing uselessly at his hips.

He leant over me so all I could see was his face, his eyes clear and intent, sharp as a knife's edge. "Do you think so?" His lips twisted with a wry smile. He pressed down harder, began to take me into him. "You thought my bite would hurt too."

"It did," I said, shuddering. I closed my eyes. My hips flexed up against him. "But..."

"Yes. *But*." He took me deeper, wrapping me with an impossible heat. He leaned his brow against mine, fingers stroking along my cheek. And he began to speak, an endless, whispered flow of words like the ones he'd demanded of me, his breath washing over my face. I barely listened, too caught up in the feel of him above me, against me, muscles clenching tight around me then releasing, only to clench again. Words were pointless, meaningless. I angled my mouth up toward his, trying to lure him into a kiss.

"No," he said, firm enough to reach me through my haze. His fingers tunneled through my hair, tilting my face. "You'll listen to me, at least this once."

I looked up at him, chest heaving, body straining mindlessly against his. I said nothing, waiting.

He gave a surprised laugh and shook his head. "Do you know, all I was looking for was a meal, that first time?"

“And a quiet bed.” My hips jerked against his, driving me a fraction deeper. “And undisturbed sleep.” A smile pulled his lips sideways. “Yes. But mostly, a meal.”

“You’ve always just wanted a meal from me.” Except the last time, I remembered. He hadn’t even asked it of me.

“Oh, is that it?” he asked softly and shook his head. “Haven’t you been paying attention at all?”

“Maikel.” I forced his name through clenched teeth. “You’re driving me crazy.”

“Am I?” His voice was suddenly hard, impatient. His hands clenched on my hair. “Well, it’s only fair, then. I’ve been clear out of my mind with madness, these weeks. Your taste. Your smell.” He slid his cheek along mine, whispering close against my ear. “Your voice.”

I turned my head, glaring at him. He laughed and stroked a finger along my brow. “Yes. That, too.” He sobered and repeated the caress with slow deliberation. “That most of all. To glower at me like the king himself...” He pushed up again, so his face was just above mine, and left a series of brief, darting kisses upon my lips, punctuating his words. “So proud. So strong...”

“Maikel...” My chest felt too tight, the air in the room too thin. He was not the first patron to whisper sweetly to me in the throes of passion, but I did not want it from him any more than I wanted it from my other patrons. “Don’t say it.”

“So stubborn.” He kissed my cheek, my eyelids, then leaned back and looked down at me with a sigh. “How could I help but love you?”

“No, *don’t*—” I shoved at him, twisting, struggling to get out from underneath him. “Don’t say it!”

He grabbed my face and hauled me up into a hard, fierce kiss, silencing my protests. He gave a sudden, sharp thrust, locking our hips together, taking me fully, so that the hands that tried to beat him back were suddenly clutching, dragging at him. His kiss muffled a low, keening cry.

He withdrew, nearly rising off me completely, then sank back down. I shuddered beneath him and thrust up, short, sharp movements that made a wild growl rumble in his throat. His fingers laced through mine, clenched tight and pinned the backs of my hands to the bed, so that I could not rise enough to follow when he broke away from the kiss and looked at me, watching my face silently as his body moved over me, and mine arched off the bed, seeking more of this maddening pleasure.

He kissed the edge of my jaw, just beneath my ear, nipped with blunt teeth at my skin. He freed one hand to drag it down my chest and rub circles around my nipple. My hands, now loosed, came up to grab his waist and haul him against me. I drew my fingers over his waist to his stomach, slid them down to curl around his erection. I pumped, setting a frantic pace, gasping against his skin as my body shuddered and strained for release.

Maikel braced his hands on the bed and drove himself onto me, fingers clenching tight in the blankets, face contorted with need. I raised a hand and slid it over his cheek. He turned to kiss my palm and his eyes opened, blazing down at me. My breath hitched at the intensity I saw in his gaze, and I had to look away,

quaking, fingers burying in his hair and clutching at him as my release came over me, a wave of fire so intense I thought it must consume me. Maikel's cries echoed in my ears as he convulsed around me. He collapsed forward, catching himself on his elbows and easing his weight onto me. When he slipped off, sliding next to me on the bed, I rolled over onto my side, shivering as I clasped my knees to my chest.

He slid up against my back and let an arm hang loosely over my waist. His breath gusted through my hair. I closed my eyes, feeling it steady and slow, feeling the sweat cool on his skin, wondering if he would chase me from my own bed again. He made no mention of it as his breathing shifted to the slower rhythms of sleep. I lay as I was, arms wrapped tight around my shins, too tense to sleep and too frightened to rise and risk waking him.

I did sleep, eventually, though it was restless and uneasy. And woke to an empty bed and sheets that smelled like him. I rose and threw open the shutters, letting in the lantern light, and didn't notice until I turned from the window the spray of crimson roses lying on my bureau. I gaped, speechless, and reached with a trembling hand to take up the slip of paper that rested on top.

A dozen roses for a dozen pleasures, and I shall have to be indebted to you for the rest. I'll honor my promise—I owe you that much. You'll not have to hear my name again.

Thank you, Arjen, for all that you have done.

Yours,

Maikel van Triet

Chapter Five

It was not that simple, of course.

For two days, it was true, I did not hear his name at all. And then it was all the gossips cared to talk about, no longer whispering about where he had been seen, but about the fact that he had not been seen at all. He is taken ill, they said. He has lost his taste for cheap De Wallen whores and taken a lady as a mistress. Eventually, someone recalled that a whore had tried to stake him, and suddenly everyone was sure that he was dead. The whore who had done the staking was kicked out of her room to walk the streets, and Elise forgot that she had lost patience with his errant ways and now sniffled sadly night and day, no matter how many times I assured her that I had seen him recover from that wound myself.

It was impossible to avoid, so I stopped trying and sat in the midst of it, letting it eddy around me like water around a stone, indifferent. I took patrons as usual, and if they asked why I had a dozen roses hanging to dry in my window, I told them they were for the other girls, and distracted them with other matters. If they looked down and whispered words of affection as they moved within me, I silenced them with a swift kiss and bid them put their mouth to a better purpose.

How could I help but love you? he had said, and it was pointless to remember the way his voice had shuddered. He was not the first to say such things to me, nor the last, but it was he I remembered when the others whispered to me, the sound of his voice and the touch of his lips upon my eyelids.

I kept his note, silly as it seemed, tucked away in a drawer with the bandages I no longer needed. But it did not stay there. *Yours*, he had written, and where the line was scrawled I had nearly worn through the paper, rubbing my finger over it as I stared out at the sunlit canal, lost in thought.

Hedy teased that I had become morose, and Elise complained that I was no fun to play draughts with anymore, for I often became distracted and forgot to let her win. But I told them they were both silly things, and I was the same as I ever was.

A few weeks passed, and then someone-or-other went south to visit a sick relative and came back with reports that Maikel van Triet had been seen around Delft, gathering a coterie of barmaids and street urchins and strutting about the town like King Lodewijk himself, attendants trailing after.

Everyone wondered what brought him there, to set up court in such a backwater town after seeing the splendor of Amsterdam. I kept my peace and said nothing.

The news came slower after that. Gossip flies fast within a city, but the roads between them are long and not so quickly traveled. But it came all the same, as incessant and annoying as the drone of flies.

I worked feverishly, thinking surely that, if nothing else, would keep my mind distracted. But it was no use. I could not escape it, not even with my patrons. The girls took pride in the fact that a vampire had favored our brothel for a time. They liked to brag, and eventually it came out that I was the one he had come for, again and again.

That was when the other vampires started visiting. The girls flocked as desperately about them as they had around Maikel. They began to resent me when every one of them asked for my patronage, ignoring the other whores completely. Hedy accused me of being greedy and keeping them to myself, and would not believe me when I threw my hands up and insisted that I did not want them.

The vampires, when they came, looked me over like I was a curious oddity. I endured it with bemusement until they began to ask me pointed personal questions about Maikel, and I realized what they were about. They wanted to know what he had seen in me.

"A meal," I told them flatly. "That's all I ever was to him." But when they, too, requested to feed, I flatly refused.

They persisted for a few days, but then they moved on. My human patrons, however, were less easily dissuaded. Soon enough all I did was answer questions about him in bed, when he should have been the last thing on my mind. They were fascinated by the idea that they could touch someone who had been touched by Maikel van Triet.

One patron, a regular I had had for some time, and had grown passing fond of, pinned me to my back as I tried to disrobe and demanded, "Did that vampire really buy you?"

"Yes," I told him, bored. It was all anyone cared to ask me, these days. "But it was just a meal he wanted. He didn't let me into bed with him."

It was not a lie. He had not paid me, either of the times that I took him to bed.

"He bit you?" My patron seemed delighted. "Where? Show me where."

I obeyed. It was what they paid me for. I turned out my wrists, letting him inspect the skin and marvel at the fact that it remained unblemished, and I touched my throat and told him I had been bitten there too, but only once.

He held me still and bent close, scraping his dull, human teeth over the spot where I'd tapped my fingers, and slid down and did the same to each wrist. I could not help but think that he was trying to stake his own claim over the one already left upon me.

I threw him out and threw his purse out after him, then sat on my bed, shuddering with disgust.

The next time a patron asked me about my vampire, it was I who left, storming out into the fresh summer air. I strode along the canal and out of De Wallen, down to the bakery. I ordered a sweet roll fresh from the oven and went outside to eat it, standing beneath a tree. Its leaves threw dappled shade across the brown crust, shifting and swaying with each breath of wind. I watched the way the spots of light danced

across the roll, across my skin, and the thought came, unbidden: *Maikel would like to hear about this. I ought to remember it for him.*

I threw what remained of the roll into the water and leaned back against the tree, scrubbing my hands over my face.

Everything I owned in the world was back in my room in the brothel, but I could not summon within me the will to return. I could not stand in De Wallen without breathing him in, hearing the latest rumor on the wind, seeing him in the eyes of every girl who whispered gossip behind her hand. Half the coins in my coffer were ones he had given me. The urge to flee, to leave it all behind me and never hear his name again was overwhelming.

Instead, dutifully, I trudged back to the brothel and up to my room. And before the sun set and another night of patrons descended on us, I packed everything I owned and cared to keep in a small bag, tucked my savings under my arm, and said goodbye to Elise.

She stared at me, at the bag in my hand and the box that I carried, and knew what I had not said aloud. “Where will you go?” she asked, coming to embrace me.

I could not answer her. I did not know. I knew only that I could not bear to stay in Amsterdam a moment longer.

I kissed her goodbye and wished her well, walked out of De Wallen, and booked a seat in the first coach I found running south out of the city.

We came to Delft, as of course any south-run coach was bound to do. I climbed down with the rest of the passengers for our brief respite while horses were watered and fed and changed for a fresh team. Unlike the others, I asked the coachman to hand down my bag from the roof.

He considered me for a moment. “The coach won’t wait if you’re not back in time,” he said. “And you won’t get back your fare.”

“I know,” I told him. “I’ll catch another if I must.”

He shrugged and threw my bag down. I slung it over my shoulder and walked into the heart of the city.

There were canals here, as in Amsterdam, with fish swimming in their depths and lilies clinging to the edges. I walked, listening to the breeze and the chatter of people upon the streets. I stopped and bought a sausage for a late lunch, and when the time came for the coach to depart, I realized that I had walked too far to make it back in time. I hefted my bag onto my shoulder again and continued walking.

The sun set, and eventually my stomach began to growl, so I found a tavern and ordered something to eat, and took a seat near the back, where I did not have to see the reflections on the water. As time wore on, the crowd became more boisterous, and someone began to talk about Maikel.

It was bound to happen, eventually. Delft may have been a backwater compared to Amsterdam, but the gossips worked just as hard here as anywhere else. I listened long enough to overhear that he had been seen at Marijn's with a dozen women on his lap, and then I stopped listening at all. My stomach knotted at the thought.

For three rounds of beer I sat there, head bowed over my plate, trying not to listen, and I did not make up my mind to inquire further until after the man had left. Suddenly, it seemed a dire matter to know. I threw coins on the table and rushed after him, dragging my bag along behind me.

I caught up to him halfway down the street. He watched me dubiously as I struggled to catch my breath. "Pardon me, I'm sorry—Could you tell me where Marijn's is?"

He snorted with disdain. I'd have done the same in Amsterdam if anyone had asked a question that so obviously labeled them an outsider. "Sure, it's down on Huyterstraat, near the canal."

I mumbled my thanks and he took his leave. I made my way toward the canal, but there were dozens of streets that led onto it, like streams feeding into a river. I wandered until my feet were sore and aching before I found it, a narrow street that connected two larger thoroughfares.

Marijn's, I was relieved to learn, was a tavern not a brothel, and it seemed well kept and large enough that it must do a bustling business, though this far into the night most of the traffic through the doors was customers leaving, not entering. I stood across the street, looking at the way the lights shone out into the night. With a deep breath, I squared my shoulders, clutched my bag and strode forward.

Inside, the bar was bright but mostly empty. A few people—men and women both—lingered, snoring on tabletops or their heads lolling drunkenly. Some had found partners and were groping in corners. A single barmaid gathered discarded cups with a weary air, and barely glanced at me as I walked in. I had seen my fair share of taverns toward closing time, and this looked like any other, but for one end of the room, where a chair had been placed with its back in a corner, turned out so that it surveyed the whole tavern. There was an astonishing amount of detritus toward that corner, long-necked bottles and half-emptied tankards clustered about on the tables. Some had fallen, rolling about on the floor in a puddle of their own liquid. The place reeked of cheap wine and beer. And in the chair in the corner sat Maikel, or someone who looked very much like him.

It was hard to tell. He slouched deep in the chair, chin dropped forward onto his chest so his hair fell into his face. I'd have thought he was asleep, but his fingers tapped idly against the chair's arm, an unsteady beat.

I came to stand before him, a few paces away. With travel-dirtied clothes on my back and all my worldly possessions slung over my shoulder, I felt like a country pauper come to beg an audience with a king.

I looked about, at the overturned benches and the empty plates scattered around. I turned back to Maikel and said, "So much for the grand vampire court everyone in Amsterdam is swooning to see. You look like a drunkard."

He raised his head slowly and watched me through the fringe of his tousled hair. His eyes seemed black in the lantern light. "You are a very long way from home."

I dropped my bag at my feet and stared down at it for a moment, feeling the weight of his stare upon me. "I bought a roll from Gerda the other day and ate it in the shade of a tree. The sun made freckles on the backs of my hands."

He was quiet. My heart pounded like a drum beneath my breast.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I don't know," I whispered, and looked up at him, feeling like I might explode at any moment. "I don't. Except that..." He shifted, sitting a little straighter. He shook his hair out of his face. I lost my voice.

He waited, and when I didn't continue, he asked, brows drawn into a puzzled frown, "Did you come all this way to tell me about your breakfast?"

I drew a breath, bracing to unleash everything that was bursting within me. But movement at the edge of my vision made me turn. The barmaid approached our corner. She spared me a brief unhappy look and a tight-lipped frown then continued past, standing before Maikel. She propped her tray on her hip and her sleeve rode up, revealing a swath of clean white bandages wrapped about her wrist.

I stared, unable to look away. My fingers traced over my wrists. They still felt exposed without their dressings, even after so much time.

"Sir?" She bobbed a curtsy and gazed at him, rapt. "It's getting on toward dawn. Will you be wanting your supper before you retire?"

"*What?*" I circled around to glare at her, full of indignation. "He doesn't need you for that. Maikel—" I spun to face him.

He glanced swiftly from the barmaid back to me. His expression shifted, became thoughtful. He leaned back in his seat and drummed his fingertips against his lips.

Maikel dropped his hand and angled his head to the side. "But, Arjen, I must eat. It's been nearly a week. Will you feed me in her stead?"

"Yes, of course." I crossed my arms over my chest. After all the times he'd boldly taken without a thought to whether I might have changed my mind, I couldn't believe he had to ask *now*, when I was standing here before him like this.

"Well." He rose and closed the distance between us with a sardonic half-smile. "Come, then. I've rooms upstairs."

I followed, climbing the stairs behind him. My fingers trailed along the banister, worn smooth by thousands of hands over the years. I looked down at the wood grain passing by beneath my fingertips and

had a sudden pang of memory, of countless trips very much like this one back in Amsterdam, leading patrons up to my room, to my bed. And it had all been meaningless.

Nothing. They had meant nothing to me, except another month's rent and some food in my stomach.

Nerves shivered through me. I tightened my grip on the rail, watching Maikel's back. Did I mean anything more to him than my patrons had to me? He did not turn, did not look or smile or speak to me. I might have been the barmaid he was taking up to feed from, for all the concern he showed.

He unlocked a door along the hallway and slipped inside, leaving me to follow.

I stepped through and found myself frozen at the threshold. It was not a room he had brought me to but a suite of them, a sitting room with chairs and settees, and a small table on which to dine, and through an open doorway a glimpse of the bedroom. Maikel's voice came from within, too indistinct for me to make out, but it went on in a steady stream until I realized that he thought I was there with him, listening. That he expected I had followed him, like any one of his attendants.

His one-sided conversation broke off abruptly. He reappeared in the bedroom doorway, watching me with a crooked smile. "What on earth are you doing?"

My stomach jumped. I stared at him across the room, unable to move. *Was* I just a meal to him? I didn't think I could bear it. How could it be possible for him to feel nothing, while I stood here aching with everything in me? I curled my fingers against my palms and lifted my chin, meeting his gaze across the room. "What you said that night—I need to know—" I drew a long, deep breath. "I need to know if you meant it."

"*Meant* it?" His smile pulled further off-center, a lopsided smirk like so many he had hidden behind with me before. Relief washed over me that he knew without my having to say which night I meant, and which words he'd said. "Good heavens. Do you run after all your patrons like this, to ask after their pillow talk? It's a wonder you can remember it all."

"Of course I remember it." It was a struggle to keep my breathing even, my voice steady. "Don't you?"

His smile spread, his eyes kindling with amusement. "Remind me."

I jerked back, as shocked as if he'd slapped me. He stood there in the center of his room, his arms crossed, his gaze curious and mild. I had been tormented, these weeks, unable to think of anyone or anything else. And he—he had moved on, obviously. He had a coterie here, and rooms fit for a king, and barmaids who offered themselves to him. He didn't need me. He didn't want me, or he wouldn't have had to be reminded of what he had told me that night.

I crossed to the settee and sat on its edge, rolling up my sleeve. I could see the tips of Maikel's boots at the corner of my vision, but I couldn't look at him. I couldn't bear to see that light, mocking smile on his face, when all was turmoil within me.

"Arjen. What are you doing?"

I thrust my arm out toward him, bent forward so I didn't have to see, fingers tunneling through my hair. "Just take it." I turned my face away from him. "This was a mistake. I shouldn't have come here. Take it and be done, and we'll call ourselves even."

Slowly, he came to stand before me. I clenched my fist, forcing my arm steady. But he didn't take hold of my hand, and he didn't bite. I dragged my gaze up to his.

"Are we back to that now? Accounts and balances?" He was still smiling, damn him, when I felt like I was about to shake apart. "And will you be expecting compensation this time too?"

I dropped my arm to my side and stood, forcing him back. It still wasn't enough distance between us. I slid away. His eyes narrowed, and he advanced.

"Why did you come here, Arjen? Tell me."

"It doesn't matter." I tried to sidle around him, to reach the door. "It was a mistake. I shouldn't have come."

His hand lashed out, catching my arm and drawing me back. I stared up at him, straining. But he was a vampire, with a vampire's strength. I could not escape unless he allowed me.

He frowned down at me for a moment, brows furrowed. Then sighed and pushed his fingers into my hair, pushed me back until I bumped into the wall and was pinned. "You are like ice, sometimes," he growled. "And I cannot make sense of it. Tell me the truth, Arjen."

I shook my head and strained away. He was too close. His presence stole all the air from me. "Let me go, damn it."

Abruptly, he released his hold on me and took a single step back. I watched him, wary, as he dug in his purse and held out a handful of shining coins.

"Tell me the truth," he said, soft as a whisper. "Or take your fee, if that's what you came for."

I gaped at him. For a moment that felt like eternity, I was frozen in place, unable to move at all as shock crashed over me. Then I pushed off from the wall and slapped his hand away from me, sending the coins spinning through the air, scattering across the floor. "I'll not take a damned cent from you, Maikel van Triet. I'm not here to be your whore!"

He grabbed my shoulders. I fought back, too incensed to care that it was pointless. My breath tore. My hands shook as I shoved at him.

"Arjen." He caught my hands in his and held them immobile. He pinned me to the wall again, his body pressed to mine so I could not thrash. I stared up at him, trembling all over with rage and heartache. He gazed down at me, solemn, no longer smiling, all traces of mirth gone from his face. "You were never my whore."

Had I not been caught between him and the wall, I'd have swayed. My hands clutched at him. My gaze sought his, dizzy with fear that I had misheard, that I had misunderstood. "Never?" I could not manage more than a breath of sound.

He pulled me into his arms. I stumbled forward and fell against him, and they were there to catch me, lifting me up. “Not ever,” he whispered against my hair. “Not once.”

I closed my eyes and leaned into him. His palms slid over my face, tilted it up to his. “Arjen. The truth.” His thumbs brushed over my cheeks. “Won’t you tell me?”

I blinked my eyes open and looked up at him. “I came— I came because—” I leaned back, shaking my head. “What else was I to do? I couldn’t stay in Amsterdam, not with your name on everyone’s lips and you gone. I can’t *think* when I’m around you. And I can’t think about anything else when I’m not. You left, and you were still driving me crazy.”

“Was I?” He dusted kisses over my face. “How gratifying.”

His mouth brushed mine, and slid away. I turned, following it, drawing him back. He kissed me lightly, then again, lingering. His fingers curled around the back of my neck, pulling me close and holding me still as he slipped, gently, eagerly, into my mouth.

My arms came around him, clenching tight, dragging him against me. I met his kiss with a fast, frantic need. He groaned and pulled at me, tugging. We stumbled, together, away from the wall and across the room, into the bedroom, and by the time he tumbled me onto the bed I’d already torn his shirt off, and he had my trousers halfway to my knees. He rolled me over beneath him, pressed me into the mattress and rose above me, breathless, laughing. I curved my hands around his waist and hauled him against me for feel of his body on mine.

He twisted out of my embrace and slid down, pressing his open mouth to my stomach, kissing over ribs and chest and throat as he pushed the edge of my shirt up. And when he pulled it over my head and cast it aside, he was above me, bent over me, his hair falling in his face.

I pushed the strands back behind his ears so I could see him. He kissed my palm, my wrist, the inside of my elbow, kissed up to my shoulder and lingered at my throat, breathing against my skin. I buried my hands in his hair and jerked him down, arching up against his mouth.

“Yes,” I breathed, fingers twisting. “Please.”

Just the prick of his fangs made me groan and shudder beneath him. I held my breath, waiting, every part of me focused on that contact. His body tensed above mine. He bit slowly, fangs sinking through flesh until his mouth was pressed against me, and he began to drink.

Need washed through me, making my skin flush, hot and hungry for his touch. I clutched at him, holding him fast against my throat, and slid my body against his for the heady pleasure of skin dragging on skin. That one point of connection—his mouth on me, his fangs in me—was overwhelming, a shudder like electricity coursing through my veins, and I craved more.

His body moved above me as he drank, thrusting, twisting. Sooner than he should have, he raised his head and rocked back, looking down at me. I started to speak, to beg him not to stop, but his gaze caught mine and the words dried in my throat. His eyes were intent, intense, smoldering.

He took my hands in his and brought them to his mouth, licking and sucking at the pulse points on my wrists. He groaned against my skin. I brushed my fingers over his cheek and pressed my wrist to his mouth in invitation.

He groaned again, and sucked harder. His eyes opened, pinned me in place as surely as a physical touch. "Oh, I missed you," he breathed against my skin. His gaze burned into me. "No one's been like you. Not one. I'd have sent them all from me, but I had to feed." His teeth scraped lightly over my wrist. His eyes fluttered closed again. "You bid me to live."

I tugged against his grip, testing his restraint. He let me go. I slid my arms around his waist, dragged my hands down to his hips and pulled at his trousers. "Get them off." Hungry whimpers forced their way from my throat. "Maikel, get them *off*."

He drew back, rising up. I ached at the absence of his touch. But the sight of his hands on the waist of his trousers, unfastening them with a few quick motions and shoving them down to his knees, made it all worth it.

He had to climb off me completely to get them off the rest of the way. I scrambled up when he did so and reached for him, fingers sliding over his chest, his stomach, gliding down to curl around his cock as he pushed the trousers off his hips. He gave a husky laugh as my hand worked over him, grinning. An arm wound around the small of my back, clasping me to him.

"Here," he murmured, bearing me down onto my back. I wrapped my arms around his hips to keep him pressed against me, but he twisted away. "Wait. Just one moment."

I pushed myself up so I was nearly sitting, and so I could watch as he reached down off the bed and felt around for something. It only took a moment before he grunted in victory and came back to join me on top of the bed. There was a small glass bottle in his hands, like the kind that held ladies' perfumes, but when he worked the stopper out of the bottle I couldn't smell anything. He poured it onto his palm and I saw it was oil, shining and slick. A shiver ran through me as Maikel spread it thoroughly over his cock.

It shouldn't have surprised me that he'd have oil tucked away conveniently beneath his bed. Maikel took too much pleasure in his indulgences not to be prepared. But I remembered the barmaid downstairs, the rapt way she had gazed at him, and the thought of who he might have been preparing for twisted like a knife in my gut.

"Maikel." I reached for him, spreading my hand over his chest. His heart pounded beneath my palm. "Tell me. Tell me what you said before." I slid my hand up, fingers curling into his shoulder. "Tell me you meant it."

He took my hand and pressed kisses to my palm. "Such a need you have, to hear these words. Surely you've heard them a thousand times before." He leaned down to kiss my shoulder. "Surely no suitor could resist. You must be sick of such words, by now."

“Patrons.” I pulled my hand away from him. My legs slipped off his hips. “They were patrons, not suitors. And it was always a lie.” I pushed against him. He eased back. The kisses he dropped on my skin were lighter, gentler, soothing. “No one ever means it. Not when they say it to a whore.”

He rocked back from me a little, suddenly serious. “And whores never say it at all. Not even if it’s the truth.” I flinched. He touched my cheek. “Especially not then, perhaps.”

“Because it’s just business,” I whispered, unable to look away from the intensity in his gaze. “It’s just a...transaction. It’s not about emotion.” My voice dropped even further, barely a breath of sound. “It can’t be.”

“But here, now, with me...you are not a whore.” He leaned his brow against my chest. His words were muffled against my skin. “And you still won’t say it.” Tentatively, I touched my hands to the ends of his hair. “Do you think I need to hear it any less than you?”

I stroked my thumbs along the sides of his neck, tracing the lines of muscle. With gentle pressure I urged him to raise his head. His face was shadowed, but I could see the hunger in his gaze as he watched me, waiting.

“No one ever means it when they say it to you, either, do they?” I asked. And of course, they would say it. The way people flocked to his kind, it was a wonder they weren’t shouting it from the rooftops at all hours of the night.

Maikel didn’t answer, but his lips pressed into a thin line and his brows drew together, and he didn’t have to. I traced a finger up the bridge of his nose, along the line of his eyebrow, thinking about the first night and the dozens of women I’d seen throwing themselves at him. *They don’t care about me*, he’d said, and seemed so nonchalant about it, like he didn’t mind. Like he preferred it that way.

I knew him better, now.

I pushed his hair out of his face, because I wanted to know what it looked like when you said those words to someone, and I wanted him to be able to see too.

“I love you,” I whispered. “And I do mean it.”

Emotion flared in his eyes, then was cut off when he pressed them closed, hard enough to draw creases at their corners. I brushed my thumbs over the lines and he opened them again, his gaze unwavering as he dragged my mouth to his.

I moaned into his kiss and broke off with a gasp when he grabbed my thigh and hitched my leg up around his waist. He matched our hips together. I shuddered at the feel of his oil-slickened cock pressing against my entrance, nudging into me. My body stretched, welcoming him. I pulled his head back down to me. He claimed my mouth in a fierce kiss as his hips flexed and thrust, burying himself in me. I tugged at him, fingers digging, body straining, until at last he began to move, driving into me with sharp, powerful thrusts. I wrapped my arms and legs about him, clung tight, and surged against him in time with his rhythm. My hands slipped through the sweat on his skin, roaming restlessly as need built within me.

He drew a hand down my chest and curled it again around my cock. The rhythm he set was fast, urgent, demanding. I shuddered, arching up into his touch, his thrust, crying out with each movement.

“Maikel.” My voice was needy and breathless. I hardly recognized it. “Please.” My fingers dug into his skin. “*Please.*”

He levered himself up and caught my gaze. He never stopped moving in me. I twisted beneath him, shuddering violently as he drove harder, stroked faster. Heat and pressure built within me until I thought I would go mad, and all the while the weight of his gaze was like a physical touch upon me.

It burst through me like an explosion, shocking, searing pleasure that drove the air from me, made me gasp and shake. Maikel tightened his grip on my cock, driving me relentlessly until I was mindless with it, wild sounds catching in my throat. And as I spent myself in his hand, he swooped down and claimed my cry with his kiss.

I clung to him, wrapped tight, holding him as close as two people could get and straining to drag him closer, until at last he shuddered, groaned against my mouth, locked our hips together.

I pulled him down on top of me. He lay there for a moment, his breath stirring over the bite on my throat. This time, when he rolled off and curled himself against my back, I turned to face him and clasped him against me. I watched his eyes drift shut, felt the weight of his arm settle over my shoulder.

“Maikel,” I whispered.

He made a soft sound, but did not stir.

I touched his cheek. “The accounts are still unbalanced between us.”

“Christ.” He opened his eyes and smiled at me. “You and your accounts.”

I sat up. He watched me, head pillowed on his arm. I pulled at him until he sat too, grumbling a light-hearted protest.

I turned so I was facing him and leaned forward, catching his face in my hands. He stilled and sobered, watching me.

“You were right,” I told him, speaking in a rush, needing to get the words out before they failed me. “Those words—I’ve heard them too many times to count. But it’s always been passion that made people say them, not honesty. No one’s ever cared to say it when they were sitting beside me, when they were not between my legs.” He blinked at me slowly. My hands tightened on his face. Fear began to make my throat close, made my words come fast and breathy. “I’ll say it again, if that’s what you want. I’ll say it a hundred times. I love you.” I dropped my hands from his face, groped blindly until I found his and laced our fingers together. “Tell me you do too. Just once more.”

Gently, he pulled his hand from mine and reached for me, laying a finger against my lips. I broke off and stared at him, waiting. He blinked at me again, and the corners of his eyes crinkled. “I love you,” he said. “Arjen, I love you.”

I closed my eyes, listing forward. His arms came around me and held me tight. I curved mine around his back and leaned my brow against his shoulder, sinking into his heat.

He lifted my head after a moment and turned my face to his. He smiled at me, bright and warm and loving. “Will you have me?” he asked, a teasing light in his eyes.

“You. Yes.” I wound my arms about his neck and pressed my mouth to his. “You and no other.”

About the Author

Aislinn Kerry wrote her first romance on a whim and hasn't been able to stop since. She has always been fascinated with the misfits, the misunderstood, and things that go bump in the night. She blames it on an unnatural obsession with *Beauty and the Beast* at an impressionable age.

You can drop her an email at AislinnKerry@gmail.com, or visit her at www.aislinnkerry.com.

Aislinn currently lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with two cats who think they own the place.

Look for these titles by Aislinn Kerry

Now Available:

All That Glitters

Running from a nightmare...falling into the arms of a monster...

All That Glitters

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Running from a nightmare...falling into the arms of a monster...

Kynan Pritchard has come to Paris to start a new life, one free from the gruesome nightmares—and the accusations of insanity—that have plagued him from childhood. He’s used to a hard-luck existence, but when a stranger comes to his aid, he thinks maybe that luck is changing. Aneirin is strong and brave, everything that Kynan wants to be. And Kynan falls for him. Hard.

But Kynan’s nightmares are about to become reality, and not even Aneirin can protect him from the monster who’s stalked him across the continent. The gwrach-y-rhibyn threatens everything—Kynan’s life, his sanity, even his love for Aneirin.

To defeat her, Kynan will have to risk becoming the very creature he hates.

Enjoy the following excerpt for All That Glitters:

I am drawn from sleep by butterfly touches against my cheek. I wake contented rather than fearful, and my eyes flutter open.

I’d thought it was Aneirin’s fingertips that I felt, but it’s not. He has bent over me, his hair falling over my face, and brushed a gentle kiss across my cheek. I make a small, strangled sound. Aneirin draws away immediately and his face flushes—with remorse perhaps, or chagrin, or embarrassment.

I push myself across the bed, away from him. “I can’t,” I cry brokenly. “Nye, I can’t do this. I can’t give you what you want from me.”

He stares down at me, and some of his color begins to fade. “What do you think that is, Kynan?”

I swallow my fear, and my pride. “You want me to forget what you are. You want me to pretend things are like they used to be, but I can’t. I can’t forget it, Nye.”

“I know,” he whispers. He traces his hand along my cheek. “I didn’t like lying to you, *mo charaid*. I didn’t like pretending to be something I’m not. I’d rather not go back to that. I would have you love me as I am, or not at all.”

“It’s not that simple.” I sigh. He wants all or nothing, and I can give him neither. I love him still, but not as he desires. I can’t give him all, but I can’t deny my heart and pretend I feel nothing, either.

“Isn’t it?” He strokes the side of my face again. I shiver beneath his touch. He leans over me again and I try to slide away, but I have nowhere to go. His lips brush mine, warm and soft. I cry out, only half in protest. I want what he offers and my desire is stronger than the strength of my will.

“It’s too hard, Nye.”

He slides his fingers through my hair. “I only offer comfort. Take what you will of it.”

I shake my head. “Don’t, Nye, please. I want—”

He pauses, then draws back a fraction. “What do you want, Kynan?” he breathes against my mouth.

“Too much.”

Flames leap in his eyes and he closes the distance between us. This time, there’s no hesitation in his kiss. He slips into my mouth, draws me into his, and the heat swamps me. It would take more strength than I have to resist. I curl my arms around his neck and lose myself in his kiss.

I’ll regret it later; I’m sure of it. But for now, for just this moment, I need the comfort that he offers. I’ll take it, and suffer the consequences later.

His touch is gentle. When I shiver beneath him, he draws me close against his chest, thinking I’m cold. I’m not; I’m filled with the warmth of his touch. It’s the sweetness of it that makes me tremble. I am remembering the first time he kissed me like this, trying to make me forget the horror of my nightmares. I remember the way he kissed me then—the way he’s kissing me now—and I forget about my anger and hurt and fear. He is Aneirin, the man who saved me from roughs and nursed me to health, the man who held me in his arms and let me cry on his shoulder, who put me back together when my nightmares left me in pieces. I remember only that he is Nye, and he is the man I love.

He draws back suddenly and stares down at me, trembling. “I’m sorry,” he whispers, hoarse. “Kynan, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t—” He starts to turn away.

“No,” I say. “Don’t.” But this time, I’m not asking him to stop. I fist my hands in his hair and drag his mouth back to mine. “Don’t leave me alone, Nye, please.”

“Are you sure?” he asks. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

I wrap my arms around his back and roll with him. His eyes widen with surprise, then close when I frame his face in my hands and press our mouths together. “Just kiss me.”

His fingers trace along the back of my neck and slip beneath my collar to explore my shoulders. He slides down my arm, caressing the lines of the muscles, and inches the hem of the shirt up my back.

I sit up and pull it off over my head. Aneirin rubs his hands over my stomach and up my chest. I open my eyes and look down at him. He is spread on his back below me, and his gaze is warm and open. His hair makes a dark ink stain upon my pillow. His eyes are even darker with heat and desire.

“If you want to stop,” he whispers, “tell me. I will. I swear it.”

I growl, frustrated that he keeps trying to make reality intrude when all I want is to forget it. I jerk his pants down his hips. He pulls his shirt off while I remove them, and then my own. I crawl up the length of his body and let my weight settle against him. He groans, pressing his fingers into my back.

I kiss his throat and chest, lick the sweat from where it gathers in the hollow behind his collarbone. His hands skim over me, a constant caress. He arches and presses himself into me, his erection against mine. I lose my breath at the feel of him and lean my forehead against his shoulder.

He slides his hands over my back, tracing lines across my waist and hips, down my thighs to the backs of my knees and up again. His fingers caress my buttocks, then slip between my cheeks to brush against my entrance. I raise my head and stare down at Aneirin.

“Do you want this?” he whispers, pressing the tip of his finger into me.

“Yes.” I rock my hips back against him.

It is so easy to forget, with the maddening pleasure of his touch pulsing through me. I throw my head back and shudder as he eases farther into me. My blood rushes loudly in my ears; my pulse pounds heavily. I draw an unsteady breath and arch back against his finger. Hungry, whimpering sounds claw from my throat as he moves within me, a very gentle thrust and withdrawal, hardly moving at all.

“Nye,” I gasp. “Please, Nye, more.” I need the white-hot rush of release to wash away the last painful scraps of memory. He gives me a taste of it, but nowhere near enough.

Desire. Destruction. Destiny.

Ghost Star Night

© 2009 Nicole Kimberling

Thomas Myrdin knows that intrigue is part of life at court, but that doesn't make his king's betrayal any easier to take. Yet heartbreak troubles him less than the apocalyptic visions that haunt him. Fiery premonitions that show the world burning in ruins—and the cause, the king's daughter. Visions and vengeance awaken a strange new power within him, but not even he is sure if he is the kingdom's savior, the king's pawn.

Lord Adam Wexley harbors a secret longing for the elegant Thomas, but his duty is to protect the newborn princess. When a sudden threat arises, Adam seeks to procure services of Grand Magician Zachary Drake. Even if it means sacrificing his own soul—and his body.

Drake has seen the worst of kings and courtiers. Now he protects himself with powerful sorcery and the adamant refusal to affiliate with any of the Four Courts. But the grand magician isn't without weaknesses and Adam may be the one enticement that could draw him to ruin.

In a rising storm of magic with the power to strip away men's souls, the thread of desire connecting three men could be the kingdom's last lifeline...

Warning: This story contains men, magic, man-on-man moments, orangutans speaking in sign language, beehive hairdos and an army of soulless janitors that seeks to destroy them all.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Ghost Star Night:

"Your hands must be tired," Drake said.

Adam looked up and caught a hesitant, but definitely sensual smile playing across the other man's lips. The idea that the magician had a sexual interest in him began to form in his mind. Unlike the other magicians he'd met, Drake's face was not inscrutable. To him, Drake seemed almost shy, although how that could be possible was a mystery.

"They are a little tired." Adam set his guitar aside and focused his attention on his host. He still looked as scary as ever. Slim black shirt and trousers. Boots with silver filigree tips. Silver rings. But now Adam noticed a subtle cologne, the glossiness of his hair. His smooth jaw.

Drake had shaved for him. Adam could see that his direct attention made Drake nervous because that hesitant look returned.

Suddenly Adam found himself in much more familiar territory. Indeed, he began to consider the possibility that guitar playing was not the activity that Drake most hoped Adam would engage in during his visit to the Black Tower. This changed everything.

While he was good at playing guitar, Adam's true excellence resided in the area of lovemaking. He smiled and offered his hands to Drake who took them, sliding his own long, thin fingers across the surface of his palms.

The doorbell rang again. And again. It rang at one-second intervals for a half-minute.

Drake's face revealed his emotions. First, that he definitely wanted to continue to explore more of Adam's skin, and second, that he was annoyed by the doorbell and that Adam should do something about it.

"Would you like me to tell them to go away?" Adam asked.

"Since my servant is away, thank you," Drake said. Adam stood and pressed the button for the elevator intercom.

"Grand Magician Drake is not accepting guests this evening." When he lifted his thumb off the button, the only sound to come through the speaker was a barrage of barking. He looked to Drake who immediately ran his diamond around the rim of his glass. The crystal glass sang out that clear, resonant note that directly precedes shattering. A fresh round of barking drowned out the sound.

Adam turned back, in bewilderment, to the speaker.

"I'm going to have to ask you to leave." As he spoke Adam heard Drake's glass shatter.

"Don't send him away!" Drake ran from the patio and slammed his hand onto the oval button that started the elevator moving up. Adam stepped back from Drake, baffled by the sudden reversal. Drake smiled at him in what looked like a feeble attempt at reassurance. "I believe I know that dog."

Drake pulled the front door open and lunged into the foyer. The lighted display above the elevator indicated the car had reached the tenth floor, then the eleventh.

Drake's expression was one Adam had never seen outside a movie theater—a sort of agony of hope.

Adam's only thought was that Drake was not the sort of man who he'd imagined as having such an intensely emotional relationship with a dog, and by the sound of the bark, a small one. He could see Drake having affection for an albino python, maybe, or a raven. But to Adam, love of a cuddly pooch did not jibe with Drake's spider-shaped ring. The thought that he might have judged another man's character on fashion accessories alone generated a grimy, shallow shame in Adam. Briefly, the notion crossed Adam's mind that the dog was inhabited, but by who?

An ex-lover? Certainly the expression on Drake's face communicated the importance of the dog, whoever it was.

Whoever it was, he wouldn't be happy to find Adam here, certainly.

This evening should be over, he thought, and aloud he said, "Perhaps I should go," but the grand magician didn't answer.

Above the elevator the number thirteen lit up and the doors slid open.

Love? Might as well ask for the moon. But a man can dream...

Captain's Surrender

© 2009 Alex Beecroft

Despite his looks and ambition, Midshipman Joshua Andrews hides urges that, in his world, make him an abomination. Living in fear of exposure, unnecessary risk is something he studiously avoids. Once he sets eyes on the elegant picture of perfection that is Peter Kenyon, though, temptation lures him like the siren call of the sea.

Soon to be promoted to captain, Peter is the darling of the Bermuda garrison, with a string of successes behind him and a suitable bride lined up to share his future. He seems completely out of Joshua's reach.

Then the two men are forced to serve on a long voyage under a sadistic commander with a mutinous crew. As the tension aboard the vessel heats up, their unexpected friendship intensifies into a passion neither man can rein in.

Intimacy like theirs can only exist in the shadow of the gallows. Both men are determined their "youthful curiosity" must die before it brings disaster down on them. Yet neither man can root it from his heart. Warriors both, they think nothing of risking their lives for their country. In the end they must decide whether love, too, is worth dying for.

Warning: Contains some mild m/m sex scenes and some graphic violence.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Captain's Surrender:

Peter bowed his head as if he was ashamed of his own smile. "It should still be said. I'm conscious you've trusted me with your career and received only privation in return. But soon I'll have the chance to show that your confidence was not ill placed, and I mean to make the most of that. You shall not regret your belief in me. I swear it."

Instinctively, Josh looked over his shoulder, to where the hatch grating lay in a pillar of faint striped light abaft the mizzenmast. There were no sounds of movement from the deck above, and no feet disturbed the grayish, filtered radiance. The conversation had taken an unexpected turn towards privacy, and he did not wish to be walked in on while he was struggling with the inappropriate joy of these words, or the much more inappropriate things he wanted to say in answer.

"You've already proved that, sir. The absence of a noose around my neck is cause enough for some loyalty, surely?"

"No!" One got used to Peter being still, measured, perhaps stiff, and forgot that he could also swoop into movement like a hawk. Josh found himself seized by both elbows before he'd registered the beginning

of the lunge. “Is that why you follow me? Out of a kind of self-blackmail? Out of fear? I thought...” He swallowed, looking almost sick with nerves. “I thought there was something more.”

Josh breathed in—a breath that seemed to take forever, while his heart paused, frightened, above the great abyss of the future. How easily he could ruin the modest happiness he had attained as Peter’s friend by misinterpreting, by leaping out unsupported into the pit.

“I thought you wanted to gloss over the incident,” Josh said, wiping his hands nervously against the skirts of his coat. Had he missed something? When they came to shore and took lodgings together, they had had a gentle, fearsomely embarrassed conversation about the unfortunate fate of Peter’s rather too well beloved tutor, Mr. Allenby, and then nothing. A few days’ awkwardness and then friendship returning like a balm. But had he read it wrong?

Had the awkwardness been in fact an inept, unspoken invitation? He fought off hope and guilt together. “Frankly, sir, when you kiss a superior officer without invitation, you feel unreasonably fortunate merely to be allowed to let the matter drop.”

Unexpectedly, Kenyon smirked. “I’ll remember that, next time I accost the admiral.” And Josh laughed, sure that he could now turn away, hide his flushed face in the shadows and let the moment pass, leaving him on an even keel again.

But Peter had not let go. It would have taken a saint to struggle against the grip of those long-fingered, elegant hands—and Josh was no saint. Though elbows did not normally feature prominently in his erotic daydreams, when they were separated from Peter’s skin only by a layer of cotton so thin that he could feel the roughness of rope burns, the callus left by a smallsword, he found himself obsessed by them, unable to concentrate on anything else.

“I admit I was a little...taken aback, at the time.”

They moved; Peter’s hands moved, sliding from elbows to biceps, and Josh had to bite his lip against the rush of illicit pleasure, the maddening desire to take the one step forward that would enable him to press himself against Peter, hot and tight together. God, he shouldn’t have thought of that.

“But the more I reflected on the matter, the more I confess I found myself...” Peter’s eyes had a trick of holding the light, as the sea will when the sun is bright, and Josh—oh how he wanted to swim, “...curious.”

No protestations of undying love. It was unsettling—it was almost real. “Curious?” Josh managed in a constricted, breathless voice that was as good as an admission of guilt. If Peter had any sensitivity at all, he *must* know how far he was pushing; he must have the sense to back off now, before it was too late.

“As to what you are willing to die for. I should like to know.”

There were a number of objections Josh could have made, and he did try. He honestly did. With his blood singing and his mouth gone dry he did say, “I...don’t wish to...mistake your meaning.”

Kenyon's right hand stroked over Josh's shoulder, came to rest on the back of his neck, the thumb moving slightly, raising the hairs on his nape in a shiver of delight. By themselves, his eyes had half closed, his face tilted up in mute offering, primed and waiting. He made a last-ditch defense. "I don't want you to do...anything you'd...regret."

And Peter closed the distance between them. They were touching, Josh could feel the planes of that hard chest, was surrounded, invaded by Peter's heat, his scent. Peter was looking down with wide eyes, his own breath coming ragged now, as Josh's fever infected him. "I should like to kiss you," he said, decidedly. "Unless you object?"

The man's voice was like being coated in molasses and licked clean. How was anyone supposed to object to that? "Christ no!" Josh leaned in, surrendering. "I mean yes, sir, kiss me. Oh, yes. Yes, *please!*"

I shouldn't be doing this. Peter snaked an arm around Josh's waist, pleased and intrigued by the way just this small touch made his friend's pulse quicken. He could feel the gasped breath fill the chest pressed against his, and it was uncharted waters from now on, with the forbidden lying like a reef beneath the surface—dangerous, exciting.

How different. He had been lucky enough to know two young ladies in his life, and it seemed natural now to gather his partner gently into his arms, to hold back, careful of her frailty, filled with reverence for a lover so small, so easily hurt. But Andrews was over six feet tall and broader across the shoulders than Peter was himself. Nothing soft about him, and delicate only in spirit. *I really should not be doing this.*

But he wanted to. The kiss they'd shared onboard the *Nimrod* had proved another difference. Drunk, faint, and taken by surprise though he had been, he would have needed complete insensibility to miss the fact that Andrews wanted him with a fury.

Both of the ladies Peter had courted had been respectable, and as such they were untainted by lust, accepting his advances out of generosity—pity even. He had always felt vile for imposing on them—a seducer and debaucher of innocent young women whom he had no real intention of marrying. A libertine, a ruiner of lives. With Andrews there would be none of that. No selfishness, no guilt.

He leaned in, barely having to tilt his head, and tentatively touched his lips to Josh's. That...wasn't so bad. Really, it wasn't. The mouth was warm and firm, the lower lip full, yielding, tempting him to bite. Shifting slightly to press closer, he licked it, tasting, and was rewarded with a little whimper that made him feel warm from head to feet. Mmm...yes, nice.

Josh's arms went around him, pulling him close. A strong hand was behind his head, a second splayed against his spine, stroking down. Easily as that, the balance shifted, and it was no longer him kissing Andrews, but Andrews kissing him—with an ardor that quite undid him. No one had ever, ever wanted him this much.

It dawned on Peter that he was not the one in control of this—the responsibility had been taken out of his hands. Unless he wished to struggle like a reluctant maiden, it wasn't his fault that the hand had twisted into his hair, the kiss deepened and heated, or that the pressure of a hard thigh between his legs had grown into something rather more than merely nice. It was bizarre to be on the receiving end of a tide of desire he couldn't equal, unnatural to be the one who had to be coaxed, pleased, seduced, but—God—the relief! The uncomplicated joy of it.

He heard himself make a low rumble of encouragement, almost a moan, and then Andrews was frantically shoving him away, the caressing hands holding him at a distance. Considerably more aroused than he had expected to be, Peter was ready to be angry at being toyed with, but the expression in Andrews' dark eyes was of fear, surfacing out of a deep, stunned bliss.

“Why...?”

“I heard something.”



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